Acerca de este libro

Esta es una copia digital de un libro que, durante generaciones, se ha conservado en las estanterías de una biblioteca, hasta que Google ha decidido escanearlo como parte de un proyecto que pretende que sea posible descubrir en línea libros de todo el mundo.

Ha sobrevivido tantos años como para que los derechos de autor hayan expirado y el libro pase a ser de dominio público. El que un libro sea de dominio público significa que nunca ha estado protegido por derechos de autor, o bien que el período legal de estos derechos ya ha expirado. Es posible que una misma obra sea de dominio público en unos países y, sin embargo, no lo sea en otros. Los libros de dominio público son nuestras puertas hacia el pasado, suponen un patrimonio histórico, cultural y de conocimientos que, a menudo, resulta difícil de descubrir.

Todas las anotaciones, marcas y otras señales en los márgenes que estén presentes en el volumen original aparecerán también en este archivo como testimonio del largo viaje que el libro ha recorrido desde el editor hasta la biblioteca y, finalmente, hasta usted.

Normas de uso

Google se enorgullece de poder colaborar con distintas bibliotecas para digitalizar los materiales de dominio público a fin de hacerlos accesibles a todo el mundo. Los libros de dominio público son patrimonio de todos, nosotros somos sus humildes guardianes. No obstante, se trata de un trabajo caro. Por este motivo, y para poder ofrecer este recurso, hemos tomado medidas para evitar que se produzca un abuso por parte de terceros con fines comerciales, y hemos incluido restricciones técnicas sobre las solicitudes automatizadas.

Asimismo, le pedimos que:

+ *Haga un uso exclusivamente no comercial de estos archivos* Hemos diseñado la Búsqueda de libros de Google para el uso de particulares; como tal, le pedimos que utilice estos archivos con fines personales, y no comerciales.

+ *No envíe solicitudes automatizadas* Por favor, no envíe solicitudes automatizadas de ningún tipo al sistema de Google. Si está llevando a cabo una investigación sobre traducción automática, reconocimiento óptico de caracteres u otros campos para los que resulte útil disfrutar de acceso a una gran cantidad de texto, por favor, envíenos un mensaje. Fomentamos el uso de materiales de dominio público con estos propósitos y seguro que podremos ayudarle.

+ *Conserve la atribución* La filigrana de Google que verá en todos los archivos es fundamental para informar a los usuarios sobre este proyecto y ayudarles a encontrar materiales adicionales en la Búsqueda de libros de Google. Por favor, no la elimine.

+ *Manténgase siempre dentro de la legalidad* Sea cual sea el uso que haga de estos materiales, recuerde que es responsable de asegurarse de que todo lo que hace es legal. No dé por sentado que, por el hecho de que una obra se considere de dominio público para los usuarios de los Estados Unidos, lo será también para los usuarios de otros países. La legislación sobre derechos de autor varía de un país a otro, y no podemos facilitar información sobre si está permitido un uso específico de algún libro. Por favor, no suponga que la aparición de un libro en nuestro programa significa que se puede utilizar de igual manera en todo el mundo. La responsabilidad ante la infracción de los derechos de autor puede ser muy grave.

Acerca de la Búsqueda de libros de Google

El objetivo de Google consiste en organizar información procedente de todo el mundo y hacerla accesible y útil de forma universal. El programa de Búsqueda de libros de Google ayuda a los lectores a descubrir los libros de todo el mundo a la vez que ayuda a autores y editores a llegar a nuevas audiencias. Podrá realizar búsquedas en el texto completo de este libro en la web, en la página `http://books.google.com`

This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google books

https://books.google.com

St. Dunstan's Clock

A Story of 1666

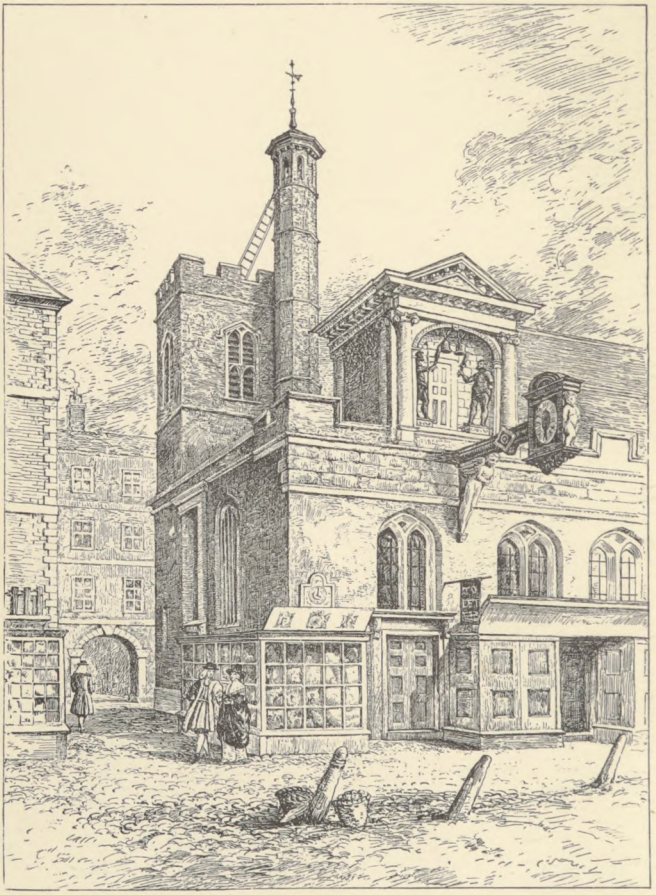
by E. Ward

Google

Hosted by Google

To Alice,
With best wishes
From Daisy.

Hosted by Google



ST. DUNSTAN'S CLOCK.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

St Dunstan's Clock

A Story of 1666

BY

E. WARD

AUTHOR OF 'FRESH FROM THE FENS,'
'A PAIR OF ORIGINALS,' ETC.

With Eight Illustrations

LONDON
SEELEY AND CO. LIMITED
ESSEX STREET, STRAND
1893

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

NOTE

THE two old timber-houses in Fleet Street, which suggested this story, were pulled down while it was passing through the press. They stood to the east of the Church of St Dunstan's-in-the-West, and marked approximately the point at which the great fire of 1666 was arrested.

Old St Dunstan's Church was demolished in the year 1832, and the only relics of it which now remain upon the spot are the monuments, which were removed to the new church, and the statue of Queen Elizabeth, which stands over the vestry door. This statue formerly stood on Ludgate, and on its destruction in 1760 was placed in the vacant niche at the east end of old St Dunstan's.

The old clock was removed to the Regent's Park, and placed on the wall of St Dunstan's Villa, where it still keeps time, and the bronze men still beat upon the bells.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A SUMMER'S EVENING LONG AGO,	1
II.	THE WATCHMAKER'S HOME,	24
III.	MAGDALEN'S FRIEND,	47
IV.	THE POOR SCRIVENER,	68
V.	THE MAN OF BUSINESS,	89
VI.	THE MAN OF FASHION,	111
VII.	SURLY STEVE,	133
VIII.	A PITIFUL APPEAL,	155
IX.	STORMY SCENES,	177
X.	A DAY OF TROUBLE,	197
XI.	CHRISTOPHER'S CONDITION,	218
XII.	A MEMORABLE SUNDAY,	241
XIII.	FLAMING LONDON,	260
XIV.	ST DUNSTAN'S SAVED,	282
XV.	THE TURN OF THE TIDE,	300
XVI.	GOG AND MAGOG AT A WEDDING,	320

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

PAGE

ST DUNSTAN'S CLOCK, . . . *Frontispiece.*

THE TWO OLD HOUSES IN FLEET STREET, . . 6

CLOTH FAIR, BY SMITHFIELD, ... 78

OLD ST DUNSTAN'S-IN-THE-WEST, ... 130

GATEWAY OF THE INNER TEMPLE, ... 166

THE CORNER OF OLD CHANCERY LANE, . . . 192

THE FIRE OF LONDON; from the engraving by Hollar, . 254

THE BURNING OF LUDGATE, ... 276

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

St Dunstan's Clock

—o—

CHAPTER I

A SUMMER'S EVENING LONG AGO

DING-DONG! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!'

A sturdy lad, in the flat cap of a London 'prentice, but with the ruddy cheeks and broad shoulders that bespoke a rustic origin, looked up, with his hands stuck in his pockets, as the metallic notes rang out above his head, and was in time to see the two bronze figures which guarded St Dunstan's clock bring down their metal clubs upon the bells which hung in front of them, repeating the action three times, to mark that three-quarters of an hour had passed since the last hour had

Hosted by Google

boomed out over Fleet Street. The sight of those grim bronze men, striking in turn each upon his bell, had never lost its fascination for the country-bred boy. He crossed the street a dozen times a day to watch the blows fall, and openly lamented that his master's shop was on the same side as the church, so that, from his station at the door, guarding and calling the wares, he could not see the actions of the figures, save by darting across the roadway as the first hammer fell.

On this bright summer's evening the number of the strokes seemed to take him somewhat by surprise. He took his hands from his pockets and looked open-mouthed at the face of the clock: though as it had but one hand, as was the fashion of clocks two hundred years ago, he could better learn the exact time by the strokes of the bells.

'Good-lack! It wants but a quarter to eight! How the minutes do slide by in all sooth! Folks will soon be a-bed, and our shutters not up yet! Good-night to you, John; I must be off to my duties.'

'Good-night, valiant Dick. Then I may

Hosted by Google

depend upon you next Sunday? It will be a rare bit of sport, I warrant you?'

Dick's honest red face grew a trifle more red. He hesitated, still with his eye upon the clock, as though conscious of the rapid flight of time and his own neglected duties.

'We'll talk more of it anon,' he said. 'There's three days betwixt to-night and Sunday. I'd like well enough to see the fight; but there be Sundays when I can scarce make shift to get away.'

'Mercy on me! They don't keep you at work on Sunday surely—and your master such an easy one too? I'd soon know the reason why if it were me. Master Widdrington doesn't sell his wares of a Sunday, eh?'

'Never a bit,' answered Dick, rather hotly. 'My master is the best in the world, and the kindest too. But there be Sundays when I walk out into the country with Mistress Magdalen. She loves well the sight of green fields and running water; and the master of late days has not felt the same strength of limb he used to have.'

'And sends you in his place with pretty

Hosted by Google

Mistress Magdalen!—ho-ho! A fine beginning for a country 'prentice! You're a wiser bird than you look, Dick Bolt. So you think you'll step into the business yourself one of these days, and turn watchmaker on your own account? Is that it, eh? And so we walk gingerly and shun Sunday sports that good folk begin to look coldly on, and go walking abroad with our master's pretty daughter. Ha-ha! That's good hearing! Why—'

But the jeering speech ended in a sudden howl, as the taller lad went down like a nine-pin and measured his length in the dusty road; Dick who was swelling like a turkey-cock, his face as red as the wattles of that irascible bird, contenting himself with a vicious parting kick as he ran across the street in a diagonal direction towards the abode of his own master, whose low doorway was surmounted by the inscription,

MICHAEL WIDDRINGTON,
WATCH AND CLOCKMAKER,

—the inscription being very much dimmed by

Hosted by Google

time and weather, and only legible in a good light.

The house, over the door of which this legend ran, was one of two old timbered houses in Fleet Street, standing under the very shadow of the ancient church of St Dunstan's in the West.

Old St Dunstan's church, which was demolished some sixty years ago, projected out into Fleet Street, standing half across the thoroughfare, and against it narrow shops were erected, where various wares were exposed for sale. The church had a low tower and a great clock hanging by an iron bracket over the middle of the thoroughfare. This bracket sprang from the south wall of the building, and directly over it was a small pavilion-like structure, in which stood the two bronze figures (called Gog and Magog by the voice of tradition), each with a club in his hand. Before each figure hung a bell, and as the quarter was reached each struck his bell with the club —once at the first quarter, twice at the second, and so to four times before the hour struck.

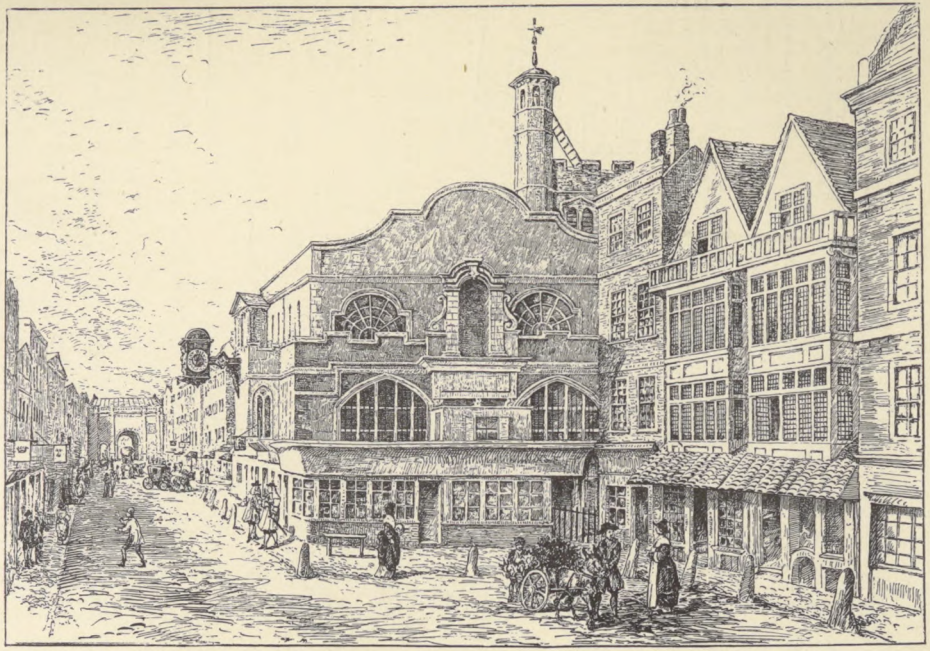
Close against the church, and shadowed from

Hosted by Google

the western sun by its projecting walls, stood the two timbered houses before mentioned, that next the church being the one belonging to the watchmaker, and looking altogether very old and faded, whilst its neighbour was in far better condition in the matter of paint and cleanliness, and bespoke at least a moderate prosperity for its owner. The name over the second door was Nicholas Brayling, and a scroll, inscribed in much smaller letters, informed such as cared to decipher it that silk goods, curiosities and antiquities, eastern embroideries and jewels were to be had within. But there was little in the window to tempt the fancy of the passer-by. Nicholas Brayling appeared to be independent of casual custom in his line of business.

These two houses, though quaint in construction, were by no means highly ornamented or so picturesque as many others in the street. Each had a gabled front, and projecting latticed windows, and a balcony above the second floor which ran the whole length of the two structures, and enabled the inmates, if so disposed, to pay visits to each other without

Hosted by Google



THE TWO OLD HOUSES IN FLEET STREET.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

descending to the street. The ground floor of each house was low and dark, and was entirely occupied by the shop and a storage place behind. The inmates lived in the rooms above, and the balcony was a favourite place of resort on summer evenings for the watchmaker and his daughter.

The western sunlight was shining through Old Temple Bar as Dick ran quickly back to his neglected duties, and as he turned the angle formed by the projecting church, he felt glad that that friendly shield had hidden from view the recent assault upon a brother apprentice. For a quick upward glance showed the boy that his young mistress was standing upon the balcony and looking down into the street, and he had a very good notion that she would not have approved the assault could she have seen it, and the fact that it was made out of love and reverence for her might not have made matters any better. Sweet Mistress Magdalen had none of the love for fights and conflicts which seemed to Dick the very essence of life's happiness. She had rebuked him many times for coming in with a black-

Hosted by Google

ened eye or bloody nose, and although she had washed his wounds with her own fair hands, she had only laughed when he had striven to kiss that fair hand afterwards, and had called him a 'right foolish boy,' whereat all the latent manhood in Dick's youthful body had risen in revolt, and he had vowed in his heart that he would soon show to all the world that in spite of his immature years he was no boy, but a grown man with all a man's feelings and impulses.

He pulled off his cap now at sight of his mistress, and was in the act of making just such a bow as he had seen a handsome young gallant on horseback that day bestow upon a lady in a passing coach, when a gruff voice bawled to him to have done with his mincing foolery and come and look to his duties—idle young jackanapes that he was—not worth his salt—never at hand when he was wanted, and always in the way when he was not!

Dick knew that voice well, and sprang to obey its summons. The thorn in Dick's present lot was the surly and passionate temper of Steve Anderson, the shopman, who had the

Hosted by Google

main charge of Michael Widdrington's retail business. The old man himself gave up almost the whole of his time to the repair and construction of clocks and watches, and took little interest in the shop, save when Steve was out of the way, and he had taken his place behind the counter. For the most part he worked by the light of a strong reflector lamp, of his own construction, in a dark den behind the shop, ever trying new combinations and experiments in clockwork, and always lamenting the imperfect state of the science, which seemed to make such small advances towards greater perfection. The old man was thorough master of his trade, and Dick looked upon him with deep reverence and awe, and was proving an apt pupil in many of the intricacies of the mechanical part of the business. But his business was greatly on the decline; for his old friends and customers were fast dying off—the plague the previous year had swept away great numbers of them—and there was not push or energy about the old man to attract fresh customers. Those who came to consult him, only too often went away

Hosted by Google

bewildered at his talk, or feared to purchase goods which were so depreciated by their owner. As the old man sometimes said to his daughter, with a patient smile, 'a generation had grown up that knew not Joseph,' and he was fast being left behind, stranded and forlorn, whilst the current of life swept past him on its never-ceasing tide.

'Anon, anon!' cried Dick, as he sprang to assist Steve with the heavy shutter he was carrying forth. Most of the other shutters in the street were already up, but Michael's shop often stood open after the rest. The old man was very easy-going in his ways, and the summer's evening sometimes brought out-of-the-way customers after hours.

'Ay, ay, it's always anon with thee,' grumbled Steve, a black-browed man, rather underhung in the lower jaw, who looked about forty years of age, 'always anon with thee—never on the spot when thou art wanted. If thou hadst any other master but the one thou hast got, thou wouldst go to bed supperless and with a sore skin half the nights of thy life.'

'Don't be cross, Steve,' answered Dick

Hosted by Google

cheerfully—he was learning by experience how best to treat his companion's grim temper, 'I've just knocked John, the farrier's 'prentice, into the gutter for jeering at our mistress. You wouldn't have had me forego punishing the loon just to be in time for the shutters. Didn't he yell right lustily? I marvel you did not hear him away down here!'

A grin appeared on the sullen face of the shopman. It appeared as though the thought of a battle mollified his displeasure. He looked Dick over as he said,—

'Thee be a good 'un for fighting, Dick. Well I'm glad thou got the best of him. Did he hit thee back? He's a bigger chap nor thee and stronger, swinging those big hammers all day long. What did he give thee back?'

'I didn't wait for that,' answered Dick laughing. 'I gave him a kick and ran off here. I hadn't time to fight it out then. We'll do that another day.'

By this time the shutters were all up. Foot-passengers were getting scarcer, and the roll of wheels had practically ceased for the night. But the midsummer evening was still

Hosted by Google

warm and bright, and Steve and Dick lingered outside the shop watching the few passers-by, and hearing scraps of their talk clearly enough. In the increasing stillness, Dick was able to distinguish the soft tones of Magdalen's voice above as she conversed with her father on the balcony. The words were indistinguishable, but the sound of the low sweet voice sent the lad off into a sentimental reverie; and he was picturing to himself a number of right doughty deeds that he was to do in her service some day, when his attention was recalled to the present by hearing a cheerful hail from the pavement opposite, not however addressed to him, but to his master above.

'Good Master Michael, have you heard the news?'

'What news, honest Peter? News comes not readily to my doors.'

'Nay, but this news concerns you something nearly, an I mistake me not. Have you heard aught of late concerning young Christopher Mason, not so long since a clerk to Master Babbington, the merchant hard by Dowgate?'

'Christopher Mason?' echoed the old watch-

Hosted by Google

maker, 'why truly I trow I know all that any man does of him. He went first on a voyage to the Indies for his master; and then was sent to Bristol to abide there for the sake of the business, where he has since remained. 'Twas some time last year we heard from him. A sailor coming round by sea brought us a letter. He was well and thriving then. Indeed, he had set up in business on his own account. Have you heard aught of him since then? Perchance you know more than we.'

'Why, verily, I plainly do, for I have seen him in the flesh this very day. He is here in London whilst we speak. I passed him on my nag but two hours ago, bringing in his goods in great waggons through Westminster. He was about to put them on a barge there, and so convey them to some wharf nigh to Thames Street, where, it seems, he purposes to reside. Other goods he has coming round by sea, which will be here anon. He must have thriven amain by what he says; and these new Acts, lately passed by the King—God preserve him!—

Hosted by Google

encouraging the manufacture of linen goods and tapestries at home, and conferring extraordinary privileges on certain persons connected with the industry, appear to have made some mighty change for the better in young Christopher's prospects. I have no great understanding of such matters; but he talked with me in a right cheerful fashion, and bid me see you if I could, and convey to you and sweet Mistress Magdalen his humble duty and service; and he trusts to be with you himself anon, to tell you more of his tale.'

'Christopher in London! Christopher a thriving man! Nay, now, but this is right welcome news,' cried Magdalen's clear voice; and Dick, stepping forth into the street, saw that her fair face was all in a glow, as she showered down questions upon the friend below on the pavement, and seemed to drink in his replies as a thirsty man quaffs great draughts of clear cold water.

Michael, too, appeared unwontedly aroused, and for many minutes, an animated dialogue proceeded, in which more than one neighbour joined. Heads were thrust out of many win-

Hosted by Google

dows, and the name of Christopher Mason was on all lips, every one combining to praise his industry, energy and talent, and to prophesy great things of his future.

Dick listened open-mouthed to all the talk. He had the insatiable curiosity of a country-bred lad recently inducted into the bustle and excitement of town life, and everything in which his young mistress was in any way concerned could not fail to interest him nearly.

Stepping back to the shadow of the shop, where Steve was still lounging, indulging in the luxury of a pipe, which indulgence always somewhat mellowed his temper for the moment, Dick began to ask eager questions.

'Prithee, who and what is this fellow—this Christopher Mason—of whom these good folk are making such a mighty talking?'

'Marry, he is a youthful merchant by this time, if all they say be true. When I saw him last he was but a clerk in a merchant's office, but with wits and impudence to spare—just the sort of fellow to push his way. His mother had been long a widow, and she dwelt under our roof, being, in some distant

Hosted by Google

fashion, a kinswoman of the master's; and he is always soft-hearted where women folk are in the matter. However, I don't think he lost by his kindness, for young Christopher brought money home regularly enow, and when she died, he still visited here often, though he lived over his master's warehouses down by the river side somewhere. And as was natural, he came courting in time, as Mistress Magdalen grew up, and they were betrothed ere he went away to mend his fortunes. Like enough he has come back to wed her now, seeing that he is on the way to make himself a fortune and a good business.'

Dick had turned suddenly pale. Even in the gathering dusk it could be seen that the colour had all faded from his ruddy face. He stepped back into the shadow, rather like one who has received a sudden and stunning blow. Steve took the pipe from between his lips, and stared at him curiously.

'Gramercy! what's got the lad! That's the way folk looked last year when they were took for the plague, and swooned and fell down dead ere one could skip out of their path.

Hosted by Google

Why, what ails thee, Dick? Hast been eating cherries again to-day and got the colic? Is the pain in thy stomach, or where?'

Anger at this base insult brought the colour back to the boy's cheek. Here had he just received the heart-breaking news that his mistress's fair hand was already pledged to another, and he was asked if he had a stomach-ache! Human nature could not stand such an insult. The boy's eyes flashed, and, springing upon Steve, with an oath (oaths were but too frequent and fashionable in those days, and well-meaning folk caught the evil habit from their so-called 'betters'), he dealt him some sounding blows with his fists, showering hot abuse upon him the while, as if so he could relieve the anguish of his spirit.

Steve was accounted a violent and bad-tempered man, and with only too good cause, but this sort of attack did not ruffle his temper. He was a strong, muscular fellow, and Dick's wildly-struck blows only served to amuse him. He knew exactly what was passing in the boy's mind. He had watched, with a grim sense of

Hosted by Google

humour, the growth of the tender passion in this boy of fourteen for his young mistress, who was nearly seven years his senior, and in mind older than her years, from such constant association with her father. So he let Dick pommel him till he was pretty well out of breath, and then it was the grieved voice of Magdalen that interposed on his behalf. The girl had slipped down the dark staircase to ask a few more personal questions of their neighbour than she cared to do from the balcony, and came upon the conflict so lustily being carried on below.

'Oh, Dick, Dick!' she exclaimed, sorrowfully, 'what will this dreadful love of fighting lead to next? Nay, I have no words for a naughty boy who will not heed a word that is spoke to him. For shame, for shame, Dick! Ay, go to bed, and be thankful it is not the prisoner's bed, where, if you take not heed to your ways, your fighting propensities will one day land you.' And so saying, the graceful, sweet-faced girl passed out into the street, and Dick sneaked away to his box-like bed to hide his tears, and strive to assert his fallen manhood by cursing the day that he was born, and

Hosted by Google

otherwise turning such fine phrases as he could recollect or invent as appropriate to one in such hard case as his.

Supper had long since been over; it was served at the universal hour of six in the first-floor parlour, which was used as the dining-room. In the room behind Michael slept, and Dick had a little cupboard-like place on the same landing, and he had soon discovered that, when lying in bed, he was able to hear every word spoken in the front room, unless the speakers were very low or very rapid in their utterance. Dick's curiosity was considerably in excess of his sense of honour, and he had frequently been greatly interested and amused by listening to conversations certainly not meant for his ears, though he frequently made little of them. When he had sneaked off to bed so readily, it was rather with a view of concealing the tears which shamed his manhood than of hearing anything of interest that might pass in the parlour; and yet, as father and daughter exchanged fond good-nights a few minutes later, when Michael had come down from the balcony and Magdalen had returned

Hosted by Google

from the street, Dick, in his unsuspected lair, listened greedily to every word.

'I am not a little thankful for this timely return of your Christopher, and shall welcome him heartily to my poor home,' said Michael. 'This news is the most welcome that I have heard these many days.'

'Indeed, yes, my father, it is right joyful news. But why call you it *timely?* Would you not always be as glad to see him as now?'

'I call it timely, my child, forasmuch as I have felt a sense of fear and oppression of late. I have troubles that you wot not of, and Christopher may be as a tower of strength to us in the day of trouble.'

'But, father, dear father, why speak you of a day of trouble? And why keep you secrets from your child? Nay, it is unkind to do so, for whom have I but you, or you but me? Dearest father, I prithee tell me all. Let us share the burden together, be it what it may.'

'Nay, thou dost half know it already, my child. Thou knowest that the days are evil; that trade, so terribly checked last year during that fearful pestilence, has never returned to

Hosted by Google

my doors; that we could not meet our rent when last it fell due; and that all these summer days few and yet fewer customers come to our door. Thou knowest this, my child, as well as I, alack!'

'Yes, father, I know it.' Magdalen hesitated a few brief seconds, as if half disposed to say more, but, checking herself, she merely asked, 'But what is the trouble I wot not of?'

'A debt, my child, a debt. It is the first I ever contracted—Heaven send it be the last!—for it hangs like a mill-stone about my neck. A debt that is yet unpaid—which I doubt if I can ever repay. And yet the day of reckoning must surely come; and thus I say I am thankful and glad that we may have a friend at hand to help if things should come to the worst with us.'

'To whom is this debt owed, my father?'

'You know the poor scrivener of Smithfield, Tom Davis by name, who comes hither from time to time to see me?'

'Why, father, yes; I go many days to see his crippled sister, poor Hannah, who ever welcomes me gladly. But they are poor as

Hosted by Google

church-mice themselves. Sure they can never have lent you money?'

'Nay, but his father did. It was the year your mother died; and I was so distracted with grief that I let my business grow slack, and had naught to meet the surgeon's bill or those of the tradesfolk who had supplied her with those delicacies her condition required. In my perplexity, I applied to my old friend; and he lent me money, and never troubled me for repayment, or made as if he remembered the debt. You know the story of his sudden failure and death. You can remember both right well? On his death-bed I visited him; and, holding my hand in his, he gave a look at poor Tom, standing by and sobbing in his grief, and he said to me, "You will do what is right by him and poor Hannah. I never meant to have troubled you; but they will be poorer now than you. Let them have a little back at a time, as you can spare it. Tom knows all, but I have bidden him be patient and never press you. You will do what is right by them;" and I said that I would, and so he died. But it is but one small ten

Hosted by Google

pounds of the debt I have ever been able to repay since; and now poor Tom tells me they are sometimes well-nigh starved themselves. I know what he is thinking when he speaks so, and what answer to make I know not. My old friend's last charge lies like a load upon my heart night and day. Thus it is that I say Christopher's arrival may be timely indeed; for, after all we did for his dying mother, sure he would not grudge me a little of his wealth to take this sore load off my neck. Then Tom would be relieved from a great strait; and far sooner would I owe the debt to Christopher than to any other living soul.'

'Oh, father; yes, yes!' cried Magdalen, with feverish eagerness. 'Oh, he will be sure to help us when he knows all. Ah, poor Tom Davis! I have ofttimes been sad for him; but I never knew—I never knew. Oh, we must relieve him of his necessities! We must indeed!'

'If we can, my daughter, if we can. Heaven send that Christopher may help us through the time of trouble!'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER II

THE WATCHMAKER'S HOME

MAGDALEN went up the dark narrow staircase with a heavy sense of oppression upon her, quite clouding the happiness with which she had heard of her lover's return. The thought of her father's secret trouble was grievous to her; the sufferings of the poor scrivener and his sister in their poverty went to her heart. It seemed terrible to her that those two had often gone hungry, and they had always had bread to eat, whilst all the while they were in debt to their poorer neighbours, and were the people who ought to have suffered first.

'If father had only told me before,' she murmured, 'I would have managed something different. I think I could have saved a little out of the money he gives me for catering

Hosted by Google

for the house. I must try what I can do. I shall feel that every mouthful chokes me till this wrong is put right. Dick must not suffer. He has the right to his victuals. It would be as great a wrong to pine him as to keep poor Tom from his own. But surely I can do with less. I am stronger and younger, and prisoner's fare will not hurt me. And then there is Christopher. Sure, when he hears, he will come to our help. Pray Heaven, he be not changed from the open-hearted youth to whom I pledged my heart and hand so gladly three years agone! I can see that father has his doubts, but I must not doubt him without cause.'

Magdalen had reached her room by this time, and now stepped out for a moment upon the balcony to breathe the sweet, soft air of heaven. The attic within felt close and hot, but the starry vault of the sky above stretched away in illimitable space, and some of the sadness and oppression passed from the girl's spirit as she stood gazing upwards into the darkening vault of heaven. As she thus stood, the familiar strokes of St Dunstan's

Hosted by Google

clock smote upon her ears four times repeated, followed by the solemn booming of the hour.

Magdalen listened, with a smile upon her face, picturing the gestures of the bronze men as clearly as though she had been able to see their movements. The chimes of that clock were interwoven, as it were, into the very fibres of the girl's nature. She could not remember the time when those figures had not been familiar to her—the centre of her childish imaginings, the source of a never-ending curiosity and wonder. Scarcely once in all her life had she failed to accompany her father on his weekly errand to the church to see him wind up the ponderous machinery, and listen open-mouthed to his long monologue on the subject of wheels, levers and bells. She knew exactly how the hour struck—not upon a bell, but on a huge iron bar in the works behind, and the clock was like a friend to her and one that never changed. She fancied that the face looked at her with a friendly expression, that the bronze figures knew her as she came and went. As a little child she had never doubted

Hosted by Google

for a moment that Gog and Magog took a paternal interest in her, and never passed them by without a friendly smile or nod. It is wonderful how childish fancies cling to us, even when reason has asserted its harsher sway upon our minds; and Magdalen still cherished fancies about the old clock which she would have blushed to put into words. She always listened for its voice in times of perplexity and trouble, and seldom listened without feeling something of consolation and peace.

Next day she observed that at the early breakfast Dick ate nothing but a piece of course brown bread, gulping it down with a draught of cold water, eschewing the ale which took the place of the tea and coffee of modern days, and bolting down to the shop the moment he had finished the last crumb. Magdalen looked at him once or twice, but he did not lift his eyes to hers. She supposed he was sulky from her rebuke of the previous evening, and was young enough to feel a little embarrassment. She did not press him to stay, and breathed more freely when he was gone. Her own meal was of the slenderest, and she

Hosted by Google

looked with some satisfaction at the remnants as she carefully put them away.

'Dick will eat double at dinner when he has come out of his sulks,' she said to herself; 'but still with frugality and care I ought to be able to save a little week by week. And what happiness to go to father, and bid him pay off just a few more pounds of that weary debt! Oh, it is worth everything to lighten his load!'

Magdalen went about with a smiling face and a lightened heart. She sang over her household tasks, sweeping and making bright the parlour, furbishing up one of her old gowns that she might have something pretty to put on when Christopher should appear, and blushing and smiling at the thought that any hour might bring him; albeit she did not look for him by daylight, knowing that time was precious to the man of business, and that at such a season as this must be for him, every moment must be doubly precious. Dick heard her sweet voice carolling above, and a dark scowl came over his boyish face.

'She is thinking of that popinjay—that

Hosted by Google

jackanapes,' he muttered, choosing his words rather to suit his own feelings than as being particularly appropriate to the industrious young merchant. 'Would that I had my fingers on his false throat, that I might shake him like a rat in her very presence and prove him for a cowardly poltroon. Has he not left her for three long years, and only writ one single letter all that while? Does he not let hours and days go by, when a true lover such as—such as *I* could prove—would have fled hither upon the wings of the wind. Good-lack! that things should go so crookedly! But courage yet, Dick. It was the tortoise not the hare that won the prize at the last. Honest merit may yet win the day over purse-proud ambition. Heaven send that she may yet have eyes to see whose love is best worth the having — his who will patiently suffer for her, or his who thinks but of himself and his own advancement.'

For Dick was beginning to feel mightily hungry by this time after his very frugal breakfast, and might, perhaps, be pardoned for prizing somewhat highly the affection which

Hosted by Google

was strong enough to endure privation for the sake of its beloved object.

Hunger is not, however, the best thing for the temper, and as Steve Anderson arrived at his work in one of his grimly jeering moods, the consequence was a considerable amount of bickering as the morning proceeded, and when Magdalen descended to the shop to remind Dick of the unheeded dinner hour, she found him stamping in a towering passion, and heaping every unsavoury epithet in his 'prentice's extensive vocabulary upon the head of the grinning Steve, who enjoyed the sport much in the same way as his social superiors enjoyed baiting a bull or a bear.

'Fie upon thee, Dick, oh, fie,' said Magdalen, as the boy became suddenly aware of her approach, and lapsed into red-faced silence. 'What a terrible tongue and temper. If I find you not fighting, I find you raving like a veritable maniac, using words it would almost break your mother's heart to hear in your mouth. Oh fie, Dick, oh fie! You are surely beginning to be old enough to know better. We pardon such outbreaks in little

Hosted by Google

children who scarce know better; but you are old enough to know the evil of such words and ways, and where they are like to land you, if you learn not to conquer yourself ere you reach man's estate.'

Poor Dick! He felt indeed that fortune was playing him very scurvy tricks, always putting him at a disadvantage in the eyes of the mistress whose favour he craved, and causing her to mistake the fervour of a deep and mighty passion, of which she was the aim and object, for ebullitions of childish petulance. He followed her meekly upstairs, cursing his ill-luck in his heart, and vowing that she should see some day the worth of the love she was contemning and despising now.

Not that Magdalen was doing anything of the kind. She had a kindly feeling towards Dick, and a great regard for his mother, who had once taken her in for many weeks after a childish illness, and had nursed her up and treated her with every kindness, even though the remuneration the watchmaker had been able to offer was very small. Dick's

Hosted by Google

home was twelve miles from London, and his parents were fairly prosperous people. They had been able and willing to apprentice him to their old friend at his own especial request, and the boy had been delighted by the change which had taken him from the dull routine of a small farm to the stir and bustle of Fleet Street. He had been as happy as the day was long, until his affection for his young mistress had taken the form of a 'violent passion,' as he called it to himself. From hearing the young gallants continually raving of this mistress's charms, and that the youths of the lower orders had caught the contagion, and looked upon it as a sign of manliness to be violently enamoured of some maiden of their acquaintance; till even in the ranks of the 'prentices something of the prevailing epidemic raged, and Dick was perfectly convinced that the affection and deferential love he felt towards his master's daughter was of the nature of a consuming and fiery devotion, which must end either in victory or death.

But the effect upon spirits and temper of

Hosted by Google

this overwhelming conviction had by no means been favourable, and Magdalen, not understanding his languishing glances and amorous sighs, began to think him less amusing and companionable than of old. His pugilistic encounters had always given her some anxiety, and now she began to be afraid that he was becoming a regular brawler, who might bring the household into trouble with the constables.

So, whilst she ladled him out a plate of broth, she lectured him gravely, and when he seemed disinclined to fall to, she spoke sorrowfully of his sullen temper or daintiness of appetite—she scarce knew which to call it; whereupon he began to bolt his food in all haste, his face growing redder and redder; but all the while he never said a word, for his very love for Magdalen had now the effect of holding him tongue-tied in her presence, and of his silent abstracted master he stood considerably in awe. In the afternoon he was sent right across London with some goods which a customer had left for repair; and having, under Magdalen's compelling eye, made a hearty meal, despite all the resolutions

Hosted by Google

of the previous night, his spirits rose considerably, and the world seemed altogether a pleasanter place. He came home about five o'clock with his hands full of flowers, which he presented to his young mistress almost on his knees, whilst Magdalen gave him one of her brightest smiles, as she took them and thanked him, and set about strewing them upon the supper-table, to help to hide its bareness, for she more than half expected her lover, yet durst not make preparations for his entertainment lest he should be unable to come. Every penny must be saved against the debt, and even if it should pain Christopher to see so bare a board, it would not be right to make a difference for him.

Just as the quarter before six had rung out, and all the girl's simple preparations were complete, even to the donning of the holiday gown, a tall figure darkened the shop door, and she heard a familiar voice ask,— 'Is Master Widdrington within?'

Her heart beat thick and fast with joyful happiness. It was his voice, deepened and mellowed by time, but his without a doubt.

Hosted by Google

She heard her father go forth from his nook behind the shop, heard his friendly words of greeting, then there were footsteps on the stairs, she threw open the door, and the next moment felt herself folded in her lover's strong embrace. It was a moment of exquisite happiness to the lonely girl, upon whom the cares and burdens of life were beginning to press somewhat heavily; and when she drew her lover to the wide window seat to look at him, whilst he briefly sketched his enterprises and successes in the past, she did indeed feel that he was like a tower of strength, and that she need not fret over their troubles, now that he was at hand to assist and strengthen them.

Nothing, however, of a sorrowful nature was allowed to mar the happiness of that first meeting. The talk was all of Christopher's speculations and enterprises. Magdalen did not understand business, but she listened with keen interest and attention whilst the two men talked. Dick, silently glowering at the newcomer across the supper-table, remained absolutely unnoticed, and presently crept away

Hosted by Google

to confide to Steve his opinions concerning the young merchant, which were none of the most flattering, as well as his own determination 'to see that that money-grubbing popinjay' (whatever such a creature might be) 'did the right thing by Mistress Magdalen.'

Michael Widdrington sat very still and thoughtful after their guest had left, and Magdalen, after watching her lover disappear down the street, crept to his side to ask if he ailed aught, or if aught troubled him.

He caressed her hair with his hand as he replied,—

'It scarce amounts to a trouble, my child, and right glad am I to see Christopher back safe and sound. Yet, methinks, there be perils too in the course in which he is embarked. I would there had been something more than mere money-getting in his talk; it savoured something too much of that covetousness which, the Apostle warns us, is in its essence idolatry. It is the way of the world—the way of the world, alas!—but Christopher seems to me something too young to have become thus tainted.'

Hosted by Google

'Nay, father, think not thus harshly of him,' pleaded Magdalen, laying her soft hand on her father's. 'Sure it is right he should desire to thrive in the world, and, as I take it, it is not for himself alone he desires it, but for us. Call him not covetous, father; it is a hard word, and, methinks, scarce a true one either. Let us test him by asking his help in our time of perplexity and need. I trow well we shall not ask in vain!' and Magdalen's eyes shone with a proud and happy light.

Michael made no direct reply, and his daughter refrained from further speech. She knew her father's temperament, his slowness to take any resolution, his aversion to ask even small favours, or in any way to push his interests. She was beginning to understand how much of their dwindling fortunes was due to this very cause, and she began to understand that it might rest mainly with her how this matter was to be settled. If any appeal was to be made to Christopher, she saw plainly that she must be the one to make it.

Hosted by Google

Christopher's second visit passed pleasantly as the first had done. He was in great spirits at the opening before him, and looked upon his fortune as an assured thing, if he only had ordinary luck. He was never weary of descanting on his own affairs, and nobody needed to talk when he was there. He was affectionate towards Magdalen, cordial and respectful to her father, and patronisingly affable to Dick on the few occasions he chanced to observe him. But he seemed to take it for granted that things at the watchmaker's had not changed in any way during his three years of absence, and he scarcely asked a single question in consequence.

Once or twice Michael said a few words about the decline of his business, the slackness of trade, and his anxiety for the future, and Christopher always answered kindly, and with comprehension and sympathy, but his words were not followed by any offer of help, or any inquiry, and Magdalen's wistful gaze at her lover passed equally unheeded. Nevertheless, she did not doubt his goodness of heart, and resolved to watch her oppor-

Hosted by Google

tunity to speak to him privately. He must have noticed the frugality of their board, and the fact that her father no longer smoked his customary pipe in an evening. Indeed, she knew he had observed both, for he had brought the old man a present of tobacco, and had given her a large packet of the new drink (tea) which in upper circles was just growing fashionable, and was soon to be sold as a liquid in the streets. Christopher taught her how to brew it, and she became fond of it in a very short time, whilst these little attentions on his part strengthened her conviction that her lover was by no means indifferent to their condition. She resolved to watch her opportunity to open her heart to him, and her chance came one evening when Michael Widdrington happened to be called out to look to the clock of a neighbour which needed some trifling repair, and which took him from the parlour just as the premises downstairs were being closed, and Dick was seeking his bed behind the panelled walls.

Magdalen had cleared the table, listening all the while to her lover's talk, and then she came

Hosted by Google

and sat beside him—not taking her needlework, for once, but letting her hands lie idle in her lap.

'Christopher,' she observed with some slight hesitation—for she did not find it quite as easy as she had thought to commence her appeal—'I have a matter I greatly wish to speak to you upon.'

'Truly, sweetheart, I shall gladly listen to anything from your lips. Is it touching our marriage that you would ask? I have said naught as yet, because I must first see my way something clearer.'

'No, Christopher, it was not of that,' answered the girl, with heightened colour; 'for, verily, I see not how I could leave my father in his old age. You have surely seen how worn and troubled he is. It is of that I would speak to you to-night. Christopher, we are in a great strait, and it is one from which you can deliver us, if you will.'

Magdalen did not raise her eyes, or she might have seen a frown on her lover's face. He gave a slight, impatient movement, and his lips parted as if he would speak; but for once Magdalen was beforehand with him, pouring

Hosted by Google

out her story rapidly and with some native eloquence, whilst he listened with his chin on his hand, following her tale intently.

'And is this debt to this man Davis the only matter of the kind which is greatly troubling you and your father? Owe you nothing in other quarters besides?'

'We owe a part of the last rent to Master Nicholas Brayling, the silk-mercer next door; but he has not pressed us, and for the rest, we pay our way—albeit with growing difficulty, as business falls away. But this debt is like a load. I know not how to bear it; and to think that those from whom we are keeping their money are lacking bread sometimes! Oh, it goes nigh to break my heart! Christopher, you will help us?'

But Christopher was actually laughing—laughing at her troubled face in a most perplexing fashion, and he reached out his hand and took hers, saying,—

'Maiden mine, you are troubling your pretty head over something that is but a phantom of your own brain. This debt is not a debt at all. You do not owe these worthy folk one penny'

Hosted by Google

'Christopher! What mean you? You are jesting with my trouble.'

'Nay, sweetheart; it is no jest, but the simple truth, as I will make plain to you. Old Master Davis lent your father the money—good. But he afterwards died insolvent—that is to say, in debt; and his creditors became possessed of his goods, leaving his children penniless; so I understand you to say? Thus you see that your debt is not to these poor folk at all, but was to the creditors years ago; but, plainly, the transaction was only by word of mouth, wherefore your father escaped being called upon for what was due. But having so escaped, the debt ceases to exist. The creditors have been the losers thereby, but not these two worthy people. They have no shadow of a claim upon your father; and he had better speedily inform them to this effect, that they feed not themselves upon false hopes which have not a shadow of substance.'

But Magdalen gazed at her lover with wondering eyes, as if she could scarce take in the meaning of his words.

'But father had the money of Master Davis

Hosted by Google

in his hour of need; how then can it be aught but a debt?'

'Because, Magdalen, there is plainly no promise of payment in writing made.'

'No—because they were friends, and he trusted him; and never meant to press him for payment.'

'Exactly, and if there had been, it would have been the creditors, not your poor friends, who would have benefited by it; so that no wise are they the worse off. Surely you understand that, child?'

He spoke impatiently, almost harshly, for the first time in her hearing. Magdalen felt as if something had stabbed her, and drew into herself in an instant.

'I do not think my father, or I, could look at the matter thus. Oh Christopher,' suddenly forgetting everything but the fact that he was her lover, and that she was in trouble, 'will you not help us by lending us the money to repay the debt and get it off our minds?'

'My sweetest Magdalen, now you talk like a veritable child. Have I not told you that it is no debt, that the very idea of payment is rank folly? Your father will probably say the same

Hosted by Google

himself when he realises the truth; but if not—why, sweetheart—how can you in reason look for a struggling man like myself to throw money into the gutters as though I were a prince?' and as she sat silent and drooping, with averted face and saddened mien, he added still in a kindly tone, though there was an underlying ring of impatience in it, 'and look you, dear heart, even if it were ever so just a debt, I could not, at such a time, come to your father's assistance. You know not how great is the need of money to a man just starting as I am upon a new career. Every penny I have to spare is engulfed in this undertaking or that. At this very moment I know not where I could turn if an unlooked for call were made upon myself for twenty pounds. We younger men starting for ourselves are surrounded by trials and difficulties you know not of. In the future I look for a day to come when my Magdalen shall have everything her heart desires, and be surrounded with the costliest treasures of the Indies; but in the present—'

'Nay, Christopher, I want no such grandeur,' answered the girl in very sorrowful accents; 'I

Hosted by Google

am not born to such splendours, and I crave them not. A little boon in the present would outweigh a mine of promises, and that little you deny me.'

Christopher rose somewhat impatiently from his seat.

'Magdalen, you wrong me by your words. I have told you two things; one, that be my willingness what it might, I have not at this moment the power to do as you ask. Added to that, I have told you, and I think you have the ready wit to understand my words, that there is no debt due from you in any wise; and that if your good father refuses to hear reason, and resolves to throw his money away, he does it, not out of any call of justice, but from stubbornness in his own judgment. This foolish stubbornness it would be folly to aid. As a man of business I say this, and you ought to give me your credence. Think you, I would urge upon you or your father any course that was lacking in honour and integrity?'

Magdalen raised her eyes with something of sorrowful appeal in them.

'Nay, Christopher, I know right well that

Hosted by Google

you would not willingly do that; yet, methinks, the world has a standard different from the one we strive to live by. I know well what my father will say—that he is so much the more bound because his poor friend may not press the debt by means of the law. His dying friend trusted him to do what was right, and father vowed that he would, and he will never be happy until that promise is kept, until the gold is restored to the children of the friend who helped him in his own hour of need; and I hold with my father there. I would work my fingers to the bone, could I get work to do, sooner than leave the debt unpaid.'

'If that is how you feel, I need say no more,' answered Christopher coldly; 'wherefore I will take my adieu without waiting for your father. I trust you will be in a better mind ere we meet again.'

Christopher was gone—Dick in his box against the wall heard Magdalen burst into tears, and shaking his fist in impotent wrath, he muttered between his shut teeth,—

'Would that I might dash out the fellow's brains with one of St. Dunstan's good bronze clubs!'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER III

MAGDALEN'S FRIEND

MAGDALEN went slowly upstairs, her heart swelling with grief and pain. It was not only that her lover had failed her — that he had been unable or unwilling to come forward with help — that would have been bad; but she had lived long enough, even in her quiet home, to know something of the backwardness of men to be parted from their gold. It was the low standard taken by Christopher in regard to this debt of honour which really cut her so deeply. To her the thing seemed so clear and straightforward—they had been assisted by a friend in an hour of sore need; now, when the need of the friend's children was sorer than their own, it was but the commonest act of honesty —let alone all sense of Christian probity—to strain every nerve to repay that debt. That any person, any man of honour could take a

Hosted by Google

view other than this — could stoop to take refuge behind a legal quibble—seemed terrible to her. That her lover should be the man, of all others, to do so, was more than she could bear. Three years ago, as she felt very certain, Christopher would not have spoken or acted thus. Three years ago, before the thirst for gold had taken such firm hold upon him, he would have felt as she did on the matter. And if these years of struggle and anticipated prosperity had so changed him in one respect, might she not find him changed in others? Her heart was burning within her, and she felt as though her love for Christopher could scarce survive the cruel shock it had received. Her quiet manner hid a keenly sensitive temperament, and though she gave little outward indication of emotion, her feelings were very easily stirred. She went up to her room and straight out upon the balcony, and a great tearless sob of repressed emotion broke from her.

'Magdalen; why, Magdalen, what ails you?'

Magdalen started, and turned in the direction of the voice, to see a tall graceful figure

Hosted by Google

rising from a low chair in the adjoining balcony. She turned towards her friend and confidant with a gasp of relief. Anything was better than the company of her own bitter thoughts.

'Marcia! I am glad to see you to-night. Oh, I have been so cruelly deceived and disappointed!' and the tears welled up and fell over, but they did good to the overcharged heart.

'You have asked Christopher for money—and he has refused,' remarked the girl addressed as Marcia, speaking with a firm decision that betokened spirit and intelligence above the average. 'Did I not bid you not to make too sure of him? I know the ways of the world and of men better than you, my gentle Magdalen.'

'I trow you do,' answered Magdalen mournfully, 'but let me tell you all, Marcia;' and, leaning side by side upon the balcony, their arms entwined, and their heads close together, the two girls held a long and rapid colloquy, in which Magdalen told all her tale, and Marcia threw in a word here and there of assent or displeasure as the case might be.

Hosted by Google

Had there been light enough to show what manner of girls these were, the beholder would undoubtedly have been struck, not only by their beauty, but by the foil each made for the other as they thus stood side by side. Magdalen was very slim and slight, her gentle Madonna-like face, crowned with tresses of silky auburn hair that heightened her resemblance to the Holy Mother in mediæval pictures. Hers was not the beauty that takes by storm, for her face, save in moments of excitement, was pale and pensive, and the heavy white lids half hid the expressive eyes of limpid blue; but her charm grew slowly upon the beholder until it became a pleasure simply to sit and watch the flickering lights and shadows upon that grave, still face, and catch, from time to time, her serious uplifted glance.

Marcia Brayling was of a totally different stamp. She was the only child of Nicholas, the money-lender and silk-mercer, who owned both of these quaint timbered houses, and resided in the second himself, albeit he could well have afforded a more spacious and pretentious home. Marcia was a splendid young creature,

Hosted by Google

tall, finely proportioned, straight as a dart, and graceful in her movements as a deer. There was something stag-like too in the way she carried her head, in her swift undulating motions, and the dignity of her bearing, which caused her to be noticed wherever she went. Her features were regular, and cut with decisive clearness, her eyes were dark as night, and shaded by long black lashes that matched the jetty arch of her delicate brows. Her hair was of the same dusky hue, and curled crisply as it hung in masses about her face, looking almost like the heavy wigs and perukes worn by the fashionable dandies of the day, and, indeed, by nearly all who could afford the adornment. There were many amongst the neighbours who marvelled that at two-and-twenty Marcia was yet unwed. Some opined that she remained single in order to attend upon her bed-ridden mother, her devotion to whom was proverbial; whilst others, who had no great love for the money-lender, declared it their opinion that he found her too useful a bait for his trap to let her go easily. Since the girl had suddenly bloomed out into this rich beauty of maidenhood, after

Hosted by Google

a rather long period of girlish awkwardness, Nicholas had found that fashionable customers frequented his shop with more regularity. He, no doubt, was well aware that bets were often laid amongst the gay young gallants as to which amongst them should be favoured with a peep at the usurer's pretty daughter, and that visits were oft-times paid in which business was done that business alone would not have brought about.

Notably was this the case with a certain young Viscount—Lord Hartsbourne by name —heir to an earldom and fine estate, though at present in continual need of ready money, his gouty father being wearied out with the follies and extravagances of his son. Up to the present time Marcia had been unconscious of the way in which her father was trading upon her beauty; but the day of awakening was coming, and she had already had an occasional warning.

Now, however, her thoughts were all with Magdalen and her trouble; and her strong arm was placed about the drooping form of her friend. The two girls were devotedly attached. They had grown up together: both leading a

Hosted by Google

somewhat lonely and colourless life. Magdalen lived alone—till Dick's arrival—with her silent father, whose speech was generally of cranks, arbour pulleys, and barrels, when he did open his lips; and Marcia—neglected almost entirely by her busy father—spent her days beside the sick and helpless mother, whose stay and solace she was: neither of them going often abroad for business or pleasure, and seldom entering each other's houses; but continually meeting on the balcony which ran between their two upper rooms, and exchanging there all manner of girlish confidences, and finding solace and support in so doing.

'Nay, now, Magdalen,' said Marcia, after hearing all her friend's tale, 'you must not grieve too much, nor break your heart over this talk of Christopher's — although I like it not well myself. But you know that men, and men of business and the world, think vastly different from us on many matters—notably on that of money and money getting. They make the laws, and, so long as a man keeps within the letter of that law, what care they for the spirit; and still less for the spirit and the letter of that

Hosted by Google

higher law, by which, one day, we shall all be judged? And yet, dearest, it is useless to be too harsh in our judgments, or to expect too much of them. We live in evil times of reckless expenditure and selfish pleasure-taking, and money runs like water through men's fingers; and those who get the chance to rise, by the fall of others, are not slow to avail themselves of it. If that is the way of the world, one cannot wonder how scant is the mercy shown to those who are the victims of misfortune, like your poor friends. I trow, if my father heard all the tale, he would say your Christopher was right in his view of the case. Heigh-ho! it is a hard world; and we poor, helpless women can do naught but look on, and lament the evil times that have fallen upon us.'

Magdalen heaved a great sigh. Her first burst of grief over, she began to wonder if she had not been rather too hard, perchance, upon her lover in her thoughts; not that she in any way condoned the sin, but wondered if, indeed, she might not make somewhat more allowance for the sinner.

Whilst she was musing thus, Marcia's

Hosted by Google

thoughts were going off on another tack, and she presently spoke in a musing tone :—

'I wonder, now, if my father could be persuaded to furnish yours with a part of this money. I grieve for the sorrows of these worthy folk, and for Master Michael's anxiety and sorrow. The money would be nothing to him—nothing. He must have more than he well knows what to do with ; and yet the puzzle of it all is, Magdalen, that the more men have, the more they seem to want, and the more reluctant do they ever appear to loose their grip of the golden coins. My father was tenfold more liberal towards my mother and me, when he was a far poorer man. Yet he thinks well of good Master Michael, and friendship will weigh somewhat with him—the friendship of so many years.'

'I had thought of Master Nicholas myself—if Christopher failed,' said Magdalen sadly ; 'but I know that father has a great dread of borrowing, and especially from—' but there the girl paused, as if unwilling to complete her sentence.

Marcia, however, understood her well, and pressed her hand :—

Hosted by Google

'From a usurer, you would say? Ay, I know well that that is what my father truly is, albeit he better likes to be known as the silk-mercer, like his father before him. Still, from friend to friend—from himself to your father—sure he would lend without looking for usury. He is a hard man, I know, but scarce so flinty as that. Why should your father not go to him and ask?'

'I will tell him what you say,' answered Magdalen with a sigh; 'for I must in truth suggest somewhat, lest he ask Christopher himself, and be sore hurt at his reply. But will not your father say just what Christopher has done—that the debt is no debt, and that we are blind fools to seek to pay it?'

Marcia slightly shook her head, but the gesture did not bespeak dissent from Magdalen's words, as the girl readily understood.

'It may well be so,' she said. 'Perhaps it were better to let me see what I can do. Of late, my father has been something more kindly disposed than has been his wont. It may be, if I asked the favour at some propitious moment, —not telling him too many of the circumstances,

Hosted by Google

but coaxing, as it were in part for myself and for you, for whom he has as much of a liking as it is his nature to feel for anybody—he might let himself be persuaded to trust the money to me. He could not exact usury from his own daughter; and, if you and I could but get some fine embroidery to do—such as the fine Court ladies wear so much—sure, we might pay him back in time. May I see if I can do aught in that manner? Let it be just betwixt us twain, and let your good father be in nowise troubled by thoughts of it.'

Magdalen caught eagerly at the idea. Certainly, if any work of hers could in any way lessen the burden of the debt, it could not be wrong to strive after it. And, surely, a daughter could scarce be chidden for asking aught of her own father. So Magdalen gave an eager assent, and pressed many kisses and words of gratitude upon her friend, for her timely thought, and timely proffer of aid.

Marcia took these lightly, reminding Magdalen that friends should ever help each other—else were the name a mockery, — and adding that, in the sombre monotony of her daily life,

Hosted by Google

any change was grateful, most of all, if it came through the helping of a friend.

But time was flying fast, the old clock was clanging out the quarters of the passing hours, and the sleepy watchman below reminding the inmates of the houses of the state of the time and the weather. A weak and querulous voice, from a window below, was heard calling Marcia's name; and the girls, with one more warm embrace, parted quickly, and Marcia disappeared within the open window of her room.

This room was a considerably more comfortable apartment than the corresponding bedchamber in the other house where Magdalen slept. The furniture itself was not costly at all, but the whole place abounded in small ornaments and bits of embroidery, odds and ends from her father's stores that the girl had begged, and had treasured up in her own private apartment. The medley was pleasing to the eye, and made the low-pitched room, with its window looking upon the balcony, a pleasant place of resort. But Marcia scarce gave one hurried glance around as she passed through and descended to the floor

Hosted by Google

below, in reply to the repeated calls of the invalid.

Poor Martha Brayling was a great sufferer. She was seldom able to leave her bed, and in addition to the injury to her spine, the result of an accident, she suffered from rheumatism which seldom left her an hour of ease. So Marcia's life, as her sole nurse and companion, was by no means an easy one, and it took all her brightness of disposition to carry her through her round of daily duties.

'Marcia,' moaned the sick woman, 'I thought thou wast never coming. And I am parched with thirst, and I want to be moved.'

'I have but been the half hour you gave me, mother,' answered the girl brightly, as she did the invalid's bidding deftly and tenderly. 'I have but been with Magdalen on the balcony.'

'I know. I heard your voices there. Would that I too could breathe the sweet air of heaven from thence as in old days. But alas those days will never return for me, and time drags by so leaden-footed when thou art not by.'

Hosted by Google

'I seldom leave you long, mother,' answered Marcia, with a smile that told of patient endurance, as well as of filial affection, and the mother extended the fingers of her feeble hand towards her dutiful daughter.

'Thou art a good child, and I am a sore burden to thee. But there be times when I trow it cannot last much longer thus, and then thou wilt be free of thy cares.'

Marcia had heard these words too often to be affected by them. Her answer was a brighter smile as she patted the hand on the quilt.

'Nay, now, you are not going to leave me alone, with all my occupation gone. And things are not so bad as they seem sometimes when you have had a bad day. Now I will give you your drops, and settle you for the night ere father comes upstairs. He loves not to find me here, and time is flying fast.'

So fast indeed that, before all the finishing touches were completed, Nicholas Brayling himself stood within the room; but he seemed in a complacent mood that night, and watched his daughter going deftly about her accustomed

Hosted by Google

tasks, with a look of awakening interest in his eyes.

'You are a good wench, but you will keep your mother from sleeping if you linger long,' said he, as she started at sight of his tall, burly figure.

Nicholas had none of the shrunken leanness of the proverbial money-lender and miser. If he were a spider at all, it was a robust and hearty-looking member of the tribe that he resembled, for he was a well-looking man, with a loud voice and jovial manner (when he chose to make it so) though, like many of his type, he could be something of a tyrant at home, as was plainly shown by the alacrity with which his lightest command was obeyed by those beneath his sway. Marcia barely stayed to kiss her mother, or make her reverence to her father, as she passed quickly out, and would no more have dreamed of answering back than of trying to fly from the balcony to the clock turret of the old church, as she and Magdalen, as children, had often longed to do.

But though she obediently went upstairs and

Hosted by Google

to bed, it was long before sleep visited her eyes, for she was considering how best she might assist her friend, and whether it would be possible to induce her father to part with any of his precious gold.

Marcia's nature was essentially active and courageous. If her mind was made up she liked to act promptly. Therefore, the very next morning, a time of day when things were always rather slack in the shop and parlour behind, she slipped down the stairs (her mother being asleep) and found her father pouring over his books and papers with a self-satisfied smile upon his face.

Nicholas never condescended to any active dealings in his shop, but customers of quality were shown into the parlour behind, which he had made very comfortable, and there he displayed his best wares and curiosities before their admiring eyes, or did business of another nature, and one almost more to his own liking. A short while back Marcia had hardly ever entered this room, but latterly she had occasionally been called down to refold silks, or put away with her deft hands costly specimens

Hosted by Google

of Venetian glass or Oriental china, upon the shelves of the presses with which the room was lined. Generally there were gay young Court gallants with her father when she was thus summoned, quaffing a cup of wine with him, and exchanging quips and cranks, none of the most refined, after the fashion of the day. But she had paid little heed to them, doing what was bidden in silence, and scarcely conscious of the glances of undisguised admiration levelled at her as she moved quietly about. It made a little variety in the day's work, and, hitherto, nothing had happened to annoy or alarm her. She had in her hand the little feather brush which she used sometimes to dust the delicate glass, as she presented herself before her father, and he nodded at her as she came in, bidding her see if any of the ornaments wanted her care.

She went to work silently at first, wondering how best to broach the subject, but her way was suddenly made easier for her by a remark from her father, who was watching her instead of minding his books.

'You have a neat hand with the breakables,

Hosted by Google

my wench, and would save me a dozen golden guineas in a year's time if you had them under your care. I mind me well, not three months back, how that loon Rufus let fall the fellow to that very mandarin you have now in your hands, and there went a good five guineas at one stroke. I cuffed the fellow well, I promise you, but that did not mend the pieces. I trow well I must look out for just such a wench as you to look to things for me.'

'Nay, father, let me do it,' cried Marcia eagerly. 'I should like right well to earn the golden guineas. It was but this day I meant to ask you for money; but if I could earn it—why, so much the better.'

Nicholas bent his brow and looked hard at his daughter.

'And what makes you thus suddenly want money?' he asked, but without displeasure in his voice, rather as if the idea afforded him either satisfaction or amusement, and all the while that Marcia was replying, unfolding a part of her story, but diplomatically concealing certain details, her father watched her with the meditative look of a man who is revolving some

Hosted by Google

idea of his own in his mind, and, as she finished, he remarked in accents that were almost kindly :

'Michael Widdrington is a good man, though not made for business, and with a head too full of wheels and pulleys to serve him well in daily life ; and his daughter is a right worthy wench, and we have been neighbours for many years. It were a kindly act on your part to earn money to assist them in their day of trouble ; and I will do my part and put employment in your way. Your mother ever improves somewhat in the warm weather, and we may reckon she can spare you from time to time as occasion serves ; and I have oft known what it was to desire your presence here.'

Marcia's face kindled with pleasure. She would have uttered warm words of thanks, but was checked by a gesture from her father's hand.

'Nay ; no need to thank me. I shall but pay you as your service warrants. I make no advance, but all you do for me shall meet due reward, and your duties shall not be over-hard.'

'I fear not hard work so as I may please you and earn money,' answered Marcia, gaily ; 'but

Hosted by Google

tell me now what I may do besides keeping these shelves and cupboards clean?'

'That is but a small thing,' answered the father, with a wave of his hand; 'any neat-handed wench could do that. But it is when I have fine customers here that I need you—to lift down what is wanted for display, and put it back again (it is thus that half the mishaps occur when Rufus comes to assist), and sometimes when fine dames come in, to put on some Eastern shawl, or drape round your shoulders the silks they think to purchase. Methinks it would help to sell my wares if they saw them thus displayed. You would make a pretty figure of a Court dame yourself, and the grand madams will surely think that they will look as well as the silk-mercer's daughter. Well, girl, you think you can even do this much, and win the guerdon I will right gladly give?'

Marcia's eyes were bright with laughter. The prospect, indeed, was altogether delightful. Not only was she to win money to help her friends out of their dilemma and distress, but her own life was to be enlivened and varied by continual peeps at the very people in whom she was

Hosted by Google

always most the interested. Often and often had she watched the grand dames alighting from their coaches and passing into her father's shop, and dearly had she longed to have a nearer view of them in all their magnificence and beauty. Never had she been summoned below when ladies had been in the parlour, but now it seemed that this was to be her main occupation. With a laugh of genuine girlish pleasure, she took from a pile in one corner a beautiful Indian shawl and flung it about her head and shoulders till her laughing face, glancing from the rich folds, looked like that of a veritable Gypsy queen, and caused her father to laugh back and rub his hands together quite genially.

'Go to, child; go to!' he cried. 'Thou art a veritable daughter of Eve for all thy stately beauty. Back to thy mother now; we will talk more of this anon, but it will work—it will work, I trow well, and thou wilt earn thy fortune yet!'

When Nicholas said 'thou' to his daughter, it was a proof of high good humour, and Marcia ran back to her mother's room, glowing and excited, feeling that she had achieved a real triumph.

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER IV

THE POOR SCRIVENER

Dick's mind was in a great ferment at this time. His sharp ears and exceptional facilities for hearing discussions of his master's private affairs, had put him in possession these last days of the whole story of Michael's difficulties and his young mistress's trouble and perplexity, and had stirred in his generous young heart feelings of great compassion, and vague but very real devotion and loyalty.

If Dick had quick passions and a love of fighting, he had also a warm heart, and affections that twined themselves firmly round their object. He was very happy in the watchmaker's home, and venerated his master as a being different from common clay. For his young mistress, we know what his feelings were, or, at least, what he believed them to be; and to find that these two beings were in any sort of trouble

Hosted by Google

grieved him sorely, and awakened within his youthful breast an intense desire to be in some sort the instrument of their deliverance.

If his heart had contracted with anger at hearing Christopher's refusal to make the desired advance of money, it had also swelled with delight at the thought of the injury such a refusal must do to him in the eyes of his lady-love.

'Beshrew me if she take him not now for the white-livered hound he truly is!' quoth Master Dick, in the grandiloquent phraseology he generally indulged in, even in his thoughts, when his mind was turned towards the subject of his mistress and his own unrequited passion. 'A cur, a stingy varlet! He talk of his love, and deny his accursed gold! Would I had my fingers on his throat! But if I up and at him, and give him the chastisement he merits, I shall but be rebuked by *her*, and chidden for my love of fighting.' And Dick heaved a sigh at the hardness of his lot, in being thus misunderstood by the object of his affections, without pausing to consider the sort of figure he would be likely to cut were he to provoke an encounter with the stalwart Christopher. 'Yet,

Hosted by Google

if I may not rough-handle him, and chastise him according to his deserts, is there no other way by which I may prove my devotion and love for her?'

Dick fell asleep, conning over in his mind every tale he had heard of the 'prentice rising to be his master's assistant and successor, and aspiring to the hand of his master's daughter; and his dreams were full of stirring adventures, undertaken on behalf of Magdalen and rewarded by her own fair hand. He awoke in great spirits, cheered by such 'happy omens,' as he chose to regard them; and he whistled cheerily as he opened the shutters and dusted and set in order the stock of wares—greeting Steve with manly independence and equality, and talking somewhat obscurely of the lofty purposes before him.

But his hard work and early rising gave him a very lively appetite at the breakfast-table, and he fell to on the viands with a hearty good-will. It was only when Magdalen had helped him a third time to porridge and the coarse brown bread which was used in the homes of the poor, that he had leisure to notice how little she her-

Hosted by Google

self was eating, and how pale and pensive was the face that was as the sun and star of his life.

Poor Dick blushed up to the roots of his hair as he recollected that every mouthful he took added in some sort to his mistress's cares; for was she not striving, might and main, to save, from the scanty sum expended upon the needs of the household, something towards the payment of that debt which lay with such a load upon them? He pushed away his plate at the thought, and muttered something about having had enough.

'Nay, but finish what you have, else it will be wasted, and waste is a sin,' said Magdalen, in her grave, gentle way. 'A good breakfast goes far to make a good day's work, and especially so with lads who have their growth to make. Leave a clean bowl and trencher, Dick; it is not time to be nice or wasteful.'

Dick finished his repast in silence, quite equal to the task of disposing of the food, yet wondering how it was that every act of his, if done in her service, was misunderstood by Magdalen. If he fought for her, he was chidden for temper and savageness. If he tried to fast for her sake,

Hosted by Google

he was rebuked for waste or fastidiousness. If he strove to wait upon her in the house and forestall her needs by his prompt service, she would dispatch him to his tasks in the shop or with her father, bidding him beware of idleness and a love of shirking his own duties, or warning him against his curiosity and habits of prying into matters with which he had no concern. The boy would feel cruelly humiliated by such rebukes, and marvel how anyone could so misunderstand his devotion. But he was always shamed and tongue-tied before his young mistress, and she looked upon him as a strange, incomprehensible boy, at once over-bold and over-shy, needing to be kept in order, yet handy and good-tempered when neither in his fighting or sullen mood.

Michael Widdrington was very busy at this time with some experiments in clockmaking, which engrossed his time and thought to the exclusion of everything else. He was too much absorbed in his calculations to trouble himself over other matters, and even the question of the debt was for the time forgotten in the more absorbing interest of the horological experiments.

Hosted by Google

Dick was assisting him in his work. The boy was showing considerable capacity for the business to which he had been apprenticed, and although only the rougher and more mechanical parts of the work were left to him, he entered with considerable comphension into all, and began to understand a great deal of the long monologues his master addressed to him or to himself —he never exactly knew which—as he sat with his tools and litter about him in the strong light of his reflector lamp, cutting, joining and fitting, and making his combinations and adjustments.

In point of fact, Michael was a pioneer in the improvement of escapements, and was discovering for himself the so-called dead escapement that Graham invented and introduced to the world, some half a century later. He was not the man to make any mark in the world, or to push into notoriety such inventions and improvements as he might discover; but he loved his work for its own sake, and toiled unremittingly at it; whilst his daughter dreamed golden dreams sometimes, in which he was to become rich and famous through his many valuable discoveries; and Dick firmly believed that his master would

Hosted by Google

die illustrious and renowned on account of his many benefits to the science of horology.

But to-day Dick had other things to think of than anchor-pallets and the recoil against which this new form of escapement was to guard. Michael talked on in his slow gentle way, without eliciting either question or remark from Dick, who was deep in his own thoughts; and presently he sent the boy into the shop to set the clocks right there, and see if there was any business stirring in which he could be useful.

But trade was very slack just at this time. The great heat and the long drought seemed to have had an enervating effect upon London. Tradesmen of all kinds complained of the slackness of business, and all down the street apprentices lounged at the doors of their masters' shops looking for customers, but securing few.

A dry parching east wind was blowing, as it had been for many weeks. There is always something trying to the human system in the combination of great heat and east wind. The sun is particularly scorching at all such seasons, and it seems to broil the life out of one, and cause languor and indisposition for any kind of

Hosted by Google

exertion. Those who remembered the fearful visitation of the plague the last year greatly feared that the heat would bring back the dreaded enemy, and many had already left town for a residence in the country. Others, again, preferred to keep themselves within the shelter of their own houses, rather than walk about the hot streets where some unsuspected infection might yet be lingering. Wiseacres reminded their neighbours how the death-rate during that awful time had always risen as the weather grew hotter, and many of those who professed occult knowledge, by means of astrology or charms, declared that some terrible calamity was certainly threatening the city.

Naturally, everyone thought of the plague, and rumours kept getting set afloat that it was coming back again. Those who still held to the old-fashioned notions of the Puritans, now held in such general abhorrence and contempt whispered that it was the just judgment of God upon a wicked and licentious Court. Others asserted that the sin of regicide had not yet been avenged upon the nation by an outraged Deity, and traced all calamities, past and

Hosted by Google

to come, to the action of those who had killed their king. And Dick listened open-mouthed to every bit of gossip or speculation that he heard, especially interested in the prognostications of coming calamity, and by no means averse to the prospect of another outbreak of the plague. He had heard so many thrilling descriptions of its terrors, that he felt a boundless curiosity upon the subject, and with a boy's taste for horrors, he fancied he should delight in such scenes, and pictured himself sometimes as the stay and support of his young mistress in the time of fear and dread (Christopher, of course, having fled and deserted her); sometimes as playing the part of watchman to the infected house, within which she was shut up, bringing her every dainty the city could furnish, and proving his devotion in a thousand nameless ways; sometimes as indulging his morbid curiosity by driving a dead-cart and assisting at the wholesale interment of the victims.

Dick's mind was altogether very busy during these next days. He was in a fever to take advantage of Christopher's absence (he had not been near them since the visit when he had re-

Hosted by Google

fused Magdalen's request), and to do something to show his devotion; and yet day after day passed by, and no opportunity came to him, whilst he scarcely ever sat down at his master's table without being reminded of the shadow hanging over the house; for the old man and his daughter seemed alike resolved upon starving themselves, whilst both combined to insist on his satisfying his healthy appetite, and any attempt on his part to emulate their abstemiousness was firmly and resolutely forbidden.

Dick many times vowed that he would not be thus coerced—that he would starve himself too for the sake of his young mistress; but when the moment came, and he was set down hungry at the table and bidden to eat, somehow nature and the habits of obedience, in which the young of that day were rigidly trained, got the better of all his grandiloquent vows, and he munched away at his bread, and supped up his broth with the aptitude of hungry boyhood, only to revile himself later on, and puzzle his brains as to what he could do to mend matters. And at last a brilliant idea struck him.

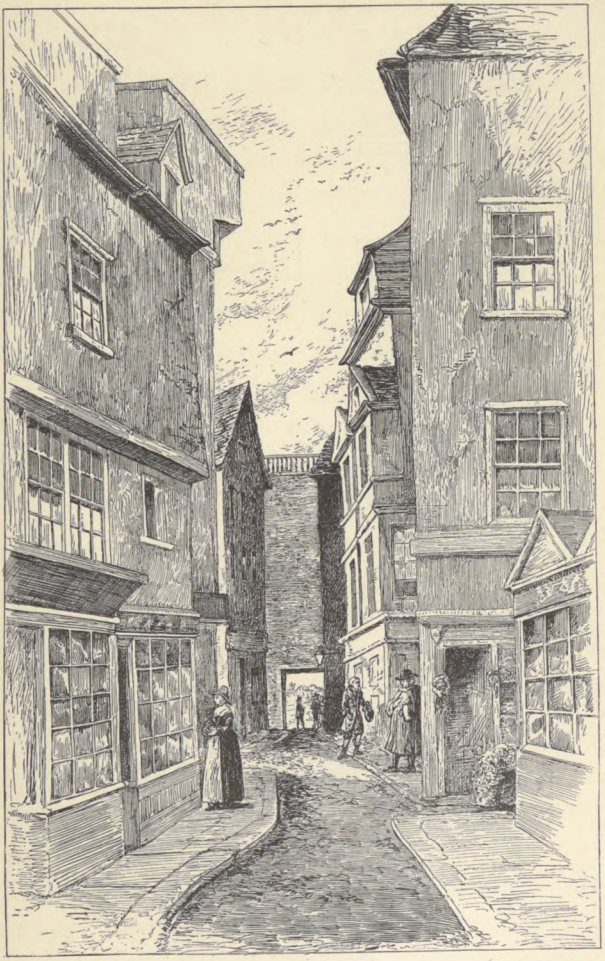
'Odds-fish! what a fool I be not to have

Hosted by Google

thought of it before!' cried the boy when the idea first struck him; 'I'll not lose a day nor an hour! But stop! There's the writing of it. How is that to be managed? My sweet young mistress writes once in a month to my mother, if there be any messenger going that way to take the letter, to say that I am well and thriving; but I could not ask her to write this—nay, and beshrew me if she would do it neither. What then? Who would do it? I have it! There is poor Tom Davis, the scrivener! He is the very man. I have the silver sixpence that gay gallant threw me three days agone for saving his fine plumed hat from a fall in the mud, when a waggoner knocked it from his head. I'll give it to good Tom for writing my letter; and I'll to him so soon as my day's work is done.'

Dick was as good as his word, and a couple of hours later was racing up Fetter Lane in the direction of Holborn, and making his way for some distance along that thoroughfare in an easterly direction, plunged into a labyrinth of smaller streets and alleys, until he reached Cloth Fair, closely adjoining Smithfield, where the poor scrivener lived.

Hosted by Google



CLOTH FAIR, BY SMITHFIELD.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

A very narrow house, two stories high, in a street so narrow that the projecting upper floors seemed almost to meet overhead, was Dick's present destination. It was a ceaseless wonder to the country-bred boy how people contrived to live thus cooped up, albeit the life of the seething city had endless attractions for him. Certainly upon this hot summer's evening it was a marvel how human beings contrived to live and breathe in the pent-up, dusty, reeking atmosphere of these back courts and alleys, and it struck Dick that the plague must have found victims enough and to spare when it had stalked into such places as these.

A faded board over the door told passers-by that within they could get their letters written, or their clothes mended for them; the crippled Hannah, the scrivener's sister, striving to supplement with her needle the modest earnings her brother made by his pen. When he could get it, Tom went out by day to work for lawyers, either in their rooms and offices, or in the law-courts themselves. But business was slack everywhere just now, and the great folk seemed too much enervated by the great heat to have

Hosted by Google

the energy even to get up disputes one with another. Lawyers complained, like the rest of the world, that there were nothing stirring, and the scriveners, who lived poorly at the best of times, were often on the brink of starvation now.

Dick's knock was answered by Tom himself —a little, pinched man with a big head, staring eyes, and a pair of long, thin white hands—who tried not to look disappointed at sight of his visitor. He bid Dick enter civilly enough, and took him into the dark front parlour, where Hannah was putting a patch upon the worn garment in which he sallied forth day by day in search of work.

Dick pulled out his sixpence, and laid it down on the table with a little bit of unconscious swagger.

'I want a letter written to my mother, Master Scrivener,' he said. 'Is yon sixpence enough for the job?'

'More than enough for a 'prentice,' answered Tom, getting out his quill and his ink-horn, his face brightening even at such a small bit of business, for the sixpence would buy them some

Hosted by Google

supper, and there was nothing in the house. 'Some folk look to have letters writ for little more than love, and paper and ink provided too. It's a poor trade—a poor trade, leastways, for those who live amongst poor folk. Have you brought your own paper, boy?'

'Nay, I never thought of it. Take the sixpence and give me a sheet,' and that matter being settled to the satisfaction of both parties, the scrivener dipped his pen, and Dick began to dictate. That letter took a long time to write, and there was a great deal of conversation as the task proceeded. Tom was very ready with an amendment on a lame sentence, or a fine word or phrase when Dick's vocabulary ran short; and, being in practice in such matters, was able to produce a result which greatly charmed the boy when at the end the letter was read over to him. Even Hannah laid down her work to listen to the result, and Tom read the epistle aloud in a telling voice.

'To my dear and honoured Mother, her son sends greeting.

'This letter is writ for me, Dick Bolt (ap-

Hosted by Google

prentice to Michael Widdrington, watchmaker in Fleet Street), by one, Master Tom Davis of Cloth Fair, scrivener, forasmuch as its contents are to be concealed from the above named Michael Widdrington, and also his daughter, for reasons hereinafter to be made plain.

'First, I would inform you, my honoured mother, that in health I am well, and that my master gives me praise for the advancement I make in the art of watch and clockmaking. Yet, forasmuch as no man is without his sorrows and crosses, I also have mine; and I am in sore trouble at this present time, because of the slackness of present trade, which causes great poverty to my master, and is a source of trouble and heaviness to my young mistress, whom the holy angels guard and preserve! Dear mother, it goes to my heart, as I trow it would go to yours, to see the table set forth, day by day and night by night, so slenderly provided. I indeed have enough and to spare. They see well to that; but they scarce eat as much as may keep body and soul together. And oft as I watch them, I think of the good cheer on your table at home; the fat fowls, the pies that none make

Hosted by Google

like you, mother; the great hams, and the pasties and cakes I never see here. And then I say in my heart: "If my mother did but know how sweet Mistress Magdalen was faring, would she not hasten to send to her some of the plentiful good cheer under which her own table so often groans?" Sweet mother, to be brief, I pray you send to me a right royal basket of good things by the first messenger, that I may have the joy of plenishing my master's table fitly. Ten days from this will be Mistress Magdalen's birthday. Prithee send the things for that day, and I will ever call myself, as I now do, thy true and most dutiful son—DICK BOLT.'

Dick knew of a messenger to take and deliver that letter right speedily, and scarcely was the ink dry before he dashed off in the dusk, to make sure of its being delivered the next day.

When he was gone, the brother and sister sat silent for several long moments, and then the crippled woman folded together her work and said,—

'This is ill news, Tom. Thinkest thou it be true?'

Hosted by Google

The pinched face of the scribe was very grave and troubled. He wiped his quill carefully, and laid it aside in a drawer with his ink-horn.

'Marry, I fear it but too well. The lad would scarce have said all he did' (for much had been spoken that in the end did not appear in the epistle) 'unless there had been great truth in it. Times are truly bad for all alike; but I had hopes that with him they might be better. Men must have clocks to tell them the time; and Michael is a clever man, and there be many that say he has a deft touch with them, and that none can so mend and set right as he. And the great clock of St Dunstan's—he has the sole charge of that, and he must be paid for his trouble. I had hope that if I went to him I might get from him a few pounds—and even one would be a mighty help in such times as these; but if he has scarce the food to feed himself withal, how can he have gold to pay away?'

Hannah sighed a heavy, patient sigh.

'He has ever said that he would not forget that debt,' she murmured.

'I trow he has not forgotten. Not long since I met him in the street, and I spoke to him

Hosted by Google

freely of our trouble. He looked sore pained, and he left me, saying he would see what he could do—he had not forgotten—he would do everything he could. For many days after that I looked to see him come in—as he has sometimes done in the past—and give us a small sum for present distress; but we have tarried and tarried, and he has not come; and hope deferred maketh the heart sick. Ah, Hannah, it is a hard thing to be poor as we are poor. I am tempted to wish the struggle ended, and we lying asleep in the grave—tempted to wish the plague had not passed us by, when others who longed for life were taken by hundreds and by thousands at our side.'

'Nay, my brother,' said Hannah, with a patient, upward glance towards the strip of darkening sky she could just see from her seat beside the window, 'we must not repine. Life of late has been hard, indeed; but it may be that we needed some such discipline. It may be that the Lord has work for us yet to do, and that He is chastening us in love and not in anger. The struggle is hard, yet day by day we are fed. Even this night we have the wherewithal for

Hosted by Google

the evening meal, albeit an hour ago we said we must go fasting to bed, and arise fasting in the morning. God has not forgotten us. And if we are in a strait, the strait of our old friend seems little less sore. They have scarce bread to eat from day to day. How can we look that they should spare us gold when they themselves lack daily food?'

Tom shook his head mournfully. He was sorry for Michael, but he was more sorry for himself. It seemed to him that his own misfortunes were of a kind which no energy or foresight could have served to avert; whilst everybody knew that the watchmaker of Fleet Street had let a good business dwindle away and languish, just for lack of a little more energy and forthputting, and through his craze for improvements, which made persons shy of entrusting their watches to him, lest he should introduce his new-fangled notions, and spoil their goods under pretence of repairing them.

'Our father came to his assistance when he was in a sore strait,' he remarked, softly. 'I always looked that he would come to ours if we were as hard pressed as now.'

Hosted by Google

Hannah shook her head, scarce knowing what to say.

'Perchance he will have a turn of luck one of these days,' she said. 'Then I know we shall not be forgotten.'

But poor Tom had grown sceptical about this long-hoped-for turn of fortune's wheel. He had been hoping for it too long in vain.

'Perchance the skies will fall—as, indeed, some men tell us they are like to do ere long, with all these portents abroad—and then we may be able to pick up fairy gold in our streets, and so pay our debts. Alack, sister, I fear there are other things liker to happen than that Michael Widdrington's fortunes will change. I trow our landlord will serve us with a writ and put an execution in our house long before that; and when our poor few goods are gone, and we driven from the roof that shelters us, whither shall we go, and what will become of us?'

'God only knows, dear brother,' answered Hannah, quietly. 'Let it be enough for us that He does know. Now go forth ere it be too late, and buy such things as we have most pressing need of. And let us thank Him that He tries us not

Hosted by Google

day by day beyond what our strength and faith can bear. Let us not task our heads with hard questions no man may answer about the future. Perchance we may be fed even as the Prophet who trusted in the Lord.'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER V

THE MAN OF BUSINESS

Dick was in all his glory. His hamper had arrived, and its contents had surpassed his fondest expectations. His appeal had evidently touched the maternal heart. She had pictured to herself her boy growing thin and weak for want of wholesome food, and she had made it very plain that she would not allow this to happen if any efforts on her part could avert the evil.

The great basket had arrived at a very fortunate moment. Magdalen had been sent out under the escort of Steve, the shopman, to pay a visit to her aged god-mother in Southwark, who always looked to see her god-daughter upon the birthday of the latter, and generally sent her home with a present of some kind. Dick, who had heard of this annual expedition,

Hosted by Google

had greatly hoped that he would be told off for the service of escorting his young mistress, and looked rather black when Steve had been chosen for that duty, but his young mistress had consoled him by a few kind words, and by asking him to set out the supper table for her, and get in a few necessaries for that meal.

'And make it all look as nice as you can, Dick,' she had said in conclusion, 'for if Christopher remembers that it is my birthday, I think he will surely drop in to take supper with us.'

Christopher had not been near the watchmaker's house since the evening when he and Magdalen had had that trifling dispute. The girl had felt his defection more keenly than she would allow, even to herself, but she believed he would come that day, and that all would be well. Dick, who had been rather glorying in the desertion of his rival, was not best pleased to hear these last words; but he forgot everything in his delight at the arrival of his mother's gift, only half an hour after Magdalen's departure, and, lugging his precious burden up the narrow staircase, with the help of the carter who

Hosted by Google

had brought it, he set to work upon the exciting task of finding out what the great basket contained.

Dick had the house all to himself, for Michael was in charge of the shop, and custom was not like to be so brisk that he would require the services of his apprentice, so Dick was free to enjoy himself after his own heart.

With sparkling eyes he undid the fastenings and raised the lid. On the top of the basket lay a couple of dozen of eggs and some rolls of yellow butter—such butter as Dick fondly believed only his mother could make from her own dairy cows. Below that lay an assortment of the cakes, gingerbread, rolls and tartlets which always accompanied a feast at home, together with an immense, solid-looking plum-cake, with Magdalen's name raised in sugar on the top, such as made the boy's mouth water to look at. Below these things again lay the more solid viands—a great pie, which Dick knew contained meats of some sort, a brace of fat fowls almost as large as capons, and another of ducks all ready for the table. Then came a noble ham and half a side of bacon, and, last of all,

Hosted by Google

a home-made cheese of the kind Dick never tasted except in his own parents' house.

No wonder the boy looked round upon his spoil with kindling eyes and a face fairly beaming with delight. How he capered about the room as he set about his preparations for the feast; and how he blessed his good mother in his heart for her royal bounty in sending him such a noble supply. He knew his father had done well that year with his cattle, and at all times his home was a well-plenished and comfortable place. He had looked for a kindly response to his appeal, but not for such bounty as this, and he scarce knew how to contain himself for joy as he watched the supper table taking shape beneath his active hands.

In the centre he placed the great cake, flanking it on each side with a dish of rolls and fancy pastries. On a large dish before Michael's seat he placed the two huge chickens, and before that of his mistress the pie with its raised crust and substantial adornments. The ham and a loaf of bread were with some difficulty placed, and small dishes of butter and conserves (pots of which had

Hosted by Google

filled up the interstices of the basket) were placed wherever room could be found for them. The ducks had perforce to be relagated to the buffet behind Michael's chair, and the bacon was hung in the larder to give Magdalen a fresh surprise upon the morrow. The eggs and surplus cakes were also put carefully away in the cupboard, the boy only reserving for himself some squares of gingerbread and a packet of home-made toffee, which he knew his mother must have meant especially for him; and removing all traces of unpacking from the dining-parlour, he washed his own hands and face, donned his holiday dress, and then kept hovering lovingly over his handiwork, putting touches here and there, and longing for the return of his young mistress.

Meantime Chistopher Mason was walking with his rapid business-like step from his place of business in Thames Street (hard by Dowgate) in a westerly direction, on his way to the house of his friends. Along Thames Street, up St Andrew's Hill, by Garter Lane and Creed Lane to Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street, the

Hosted by Google

young man strode with mechanical precision, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, but going straightforward, as was his wont, and wasting no time or energy by taking one step out of his direct path. His mind was working, as it was always working now, upon the best methods of legitimate speculation in business, and how to ensure the success of his many ventures. He had almost forgotten his last interview with Magdalen, and the fact that she had parted from him in distress, if not in anger. These past days had been full of work and thought. He had had no leisure for minor matters, and it had never occurred to him to suppose that Magdalen could fail to accept his opinion on the point on which she had consulted him when she had had leisure to think the matter quietly over. He had not absented himself from the gabled house out of vexation, but simply on account of press of business. He approached it now without any misgiving, feeling in his pocket for the little case containing the plain silver ring he had brought for her acceptance—a pledge of that more precious ring he would one day bestow upon her—

Hosted by Google

and wondering if she would be looking out for his approach from her favourite balcony as she used to do in years gone by.

But there was no sign of her there, and Christopher walked straight into the shop. Michael was behind the counter, and, leaning upon it with a puzzled expression of countenance, was a gentleman well and soberly dressed, who had so much the air of a physician that Christopher did not doubt for a moment that such was his calling in life, nor yet that he was a man of considerable substance.

Neither of the pair noticed his quiet entrance, and he stood still in the door-way, listening to what was passing.

Michael held in his hands one of his own watches—apparently one that the stranger had some thoughts of purchasing—and he was displaying its works and discanting upon the mechanism in a fashion plainly beyond the range of his listener. Christopher heard strange phrases fall from his lips—the arc of vibration—the friction of the pivots—the compensation of balances—and the everlasting theme of escapements, vertical, or horizontal, upon which it

Hosted by Google

seemed to Christopher that Michael could talk for ever.

To those who knew the old man and his ways, this style of monologue seemed natural enough, but Christopher plainly saw that the effect it was producing on the customer was to convince him of the worthlessness of the wares before him. He knew too little of the subject to see that Michael's strictures were directed against the imperfections of watches and clocks in general, and naturally supposed him to be pointing out deficiencies in the particular one in his hands, and as this was plainly about the fourth which had been similarly criticised, the worthy man was just about to give up the whole business in despair. He took up his gloves and cane, and raised his hat to put upon his head.

'I am sorry, good Master Widdrington, to have put you to this trouble for nought,' he said, 'but a good watch I must have—my profession above all others demands it—and since all yours are so faulty in construction, I must needs go elsewhere. I was told I might rely on your wares, but by what you say—'

Hosted by Google

Michael had raised his mild blue eyes in some bewilderment to the stranger's face, awaking with difficulty to the practical aspect of the question, all his thoughts being with the theoretical side of the matter. He would, undoubtedly, have allowed the stranger to walk out unopposed, had not Christopher stepped forward and interposed. Christopher was a very good-looking and well-mannered young fellow, and his business had taken into many different sorts of society, and had given him a pretty keen insight into the characters of those he met with. He had gathered in these few minutes that the stranger was a man of genial and easy-going disposition, and he really did want a good watch and would be glad to get one of an honest man, to whom he had probably been recommended, and that he disliked going away empty-handed, after having spent so much time in the shop; so, stepping forward with a modest yet confident mien, Christopher broke in upon the physician's hesitating speech.

'And if you will pardon my interference, good sir, I may assure you that it is no untrue report you have heard of the wares of Master Michael.

Hosted by Google

You truly say that a physician needs, above all other men, a watch upon which he may rely, yet not the less so does a ship's captain, and one such to whom I recommended Master Michael's ship's watches, never goes elsewhere, and has thanked me a hundred times for naming so good a man to him. He would say the same himself were he here at this moment. All the wares sold in this shop are absolutely to be trusted.'

'So I understood from my friend,' answered the doctor, smiling. 'But I gathered from the master himself that his watches were not to be trusted—that the construction was faulty.'

'Ah, that is the impression often produced upon those who listen to his learned talk; but, I assure you, that the defects he points out are not defects in his own wares, but those common to every watch or clock in the kingdom. Master Michael is a pioneer of improvements, which will doubtless one day mark an epoch in the era of watchmaking, and in his vast knowledge of the subject lies the safety of his customers. All the instruments that leave his shop have been fully and accurately tested, and every adjustment that can be thoroughly relied

Hosted by Google

upon has been made to ensure perfect action and regular going. Look at the clocks in the shop! Do they differ one hair's-breadth from another? No! They all stand at exactly the same time. Show me another clockmaker whose wares display the same uniformity! And why this? Marry, because all have been so regulated and adjusted that they neither gain nor lose. They work as truly as mortal clock-work can do, and the master visits them daily at noon to see if by mischance one out of all the number has gained or lost a single second. If it has, it is taken down for examination, and so regulated as to make it as trustworthy as its brethren. I ask you not to take my word; I only ask you to examine for yourself all the going clocks and watches in the shop.'

The stranger did so, and seemed struck by the uniformity he saw. Christopher showed him round, adroitly pointing out many of the excellences which his own keen eyes detected in the objects before them; and in the end the genial physician purchased not only a gold watch of fine workmanship, but a rather costly clock, paying down his golden guineas over the

Hosted by Google

counter, and asking Christopher to call him a coach to carry the goods home.

Michael stood at the shop-door smiling as the customer drove off, and as Christopher returned within he gently shook him by the hand as he said,—

'In truth I have had no time to greet you as yet, good lad. You came at a good time for me. Yon worthy man was taken by your cheerful way. You make a right excellent salesman, Christopher.'

'Say rather that you make a villainous bad one,' answered Christopher, with rather brutal directness and candour. Like many men of his calibre, it was easier for him to do a kindly action than to speak a kindly word. He had been glad enough to do Michael a good turn, but it seemed to him as though the very fact of his having done this gave him the right to express himself freely; and to a shrewd man of business it was profoundly irritating to see chances of advancement allowed to slip by; a man deliberately standing in his own light and calmly depreciating the very goods by the sale of which he made his livelihood, and

Hosted by Google

which he knew all the while to be the best of their kind.

'Good Master Michael, it is time this sort of folly ceased. What wonder your business dwindles? What wonder your customers fall away, when you drive them from your doors by your long words and laments over imperfections which none beside yourself could detect or even understand when pointed out. You are taking the bread from your daughter's mouth by your unreasoning folly and love of learned disquisition. For the sake of gratifying your pedantic vanity, you are robbing your own child of what she has a right to expect from you—a comfortable home now, and a modest dowry when she marries.'

As Christopher uttered these words in a rather loud tone of voice, Magdalen herself made her quiet entrance into the shop. That she had heard all was plain from the grieved and pained look in her eyes as she passed Christopher without a word and went quietly up the stairs. For one moment the self-confident young man looked somewhat ashamed, and made no attempt to restrain her. Magdalen went swiftly

Hosted by Google

into the parlour above, and there stopped short with an exclamation of amazement and dismay.

'Dick!' she cried breathlessly. 'O Dick! Dick! what have you done. Call you *this* a modest marketing fit for poor folk like us? O Dick!'

But the boy sprang forward, and in great excitement explained that it all was his mother's gift, and begged her to accept it.

Magdalen's face cleared, and she listened with some amusement to Dick's magnificent words. She guessed that he got his fine phrases from watching encounters of the gentry in the street, or from attending the dramatic representations of the many little theatres which were awakening into activity after their long silence in Puritan days. Nor was she far wrong in this, for Dick loved the play above every other diversion, and always pictured himself the hero, with Magdalen for the lady of his choice. Magdalen suffered him to kiss her hand, and then she bid him no longer be foolish, but tell her how it came about that his mother knew of her birthday to have remembered it so generously.

Whilst Dick told his tale and displayed the

Hosted by Google

viands with boyish pride, Magdalen hovered round the table half pleased, half pained by the lavish generosity of the gift. Kindness from friends is always sweet; but there was something a little humiliating in the thought that tidings of their poverty had reached their country friends through Dick, and though he had not wished Magdalen to gather as much from his tale, she could not help a shrewd suspicion of the truth.

Nevertheless, she thanked Dick sweetly and heartily, showed him the gift of her god-mother —a case of working implements such as were in vogue at that time—and ran up to her chamber to remove her out-door dress and don her holiday kirtle, so as to do honour to the day and to the fare. When she got down, Michael and Christopher were both there, questioning Dick and remarking on the good cheer before them. Christopher plainly regarded Dick with small favour, and more than once rebuked him for a saucy boy, a phrase which caused him to crimson and swell with suppressed fury. But Magdalen's presence acted like oil on the waters. She dispatched Dick to bid Steve

Hosted by Google

put up the shutters and join the feast, and when he was gone she requested Christopher not to tease or laugh at the 'prentice boy, for he was a good lad, and warm-hearted, and naturally a little uplifted to-night.

That Christopher was in a rather bad temper that day could not be denied. Already she had heard him speak roughly to her father and to Dick; and it was plain that he resented this gift of viands to his lady love, though he had no disposition to bestow any of his own goods to help them in their visible need. Magdalen tried not to compare Dick's practical devotion with Christopher's professions of love. She longed to think the best of him to whom her hand was pledged, and who exercised so strong a personal influence upon her, but she could not be blind to his faults, and to-night he seemed determined to show himself at his worst.

When supper was ended, and Steve dismissed for the night, and when Dick had retired to his bed—to sleep on this occasion too soundly to overhear any conversation in the parlour, Magdalen brewed some tea for

Hosted by Google

her father and lover, who were to smoke a pipe in company, and sitting down beside the open window with some work which required little light, she listened to the talk between the two, and wondered what was on Christopher's mind to make him so short and curt with her father.

Michael was in better spirits than usual, and and turning to his daughter told her of the fortunate issue of the afternoon, and added that he hoped to be able to give her a golden guinea on the morrow to take to the poor scrivener, together with some of the good things sent in the hamper, already put aside for them ; and Magdalen's face brightened at the promise, whilst that of Christopher darkened and contracted with impatient scorn.

'Well, Master Michael,' he said. 'Every man must go his own way, and it may be I have no call to interfere ; but at the rate things are going with you, and with the fashion in which you do business, you will scarce stave off ruin and bankruptcy another two years, and you will be lucky if you do not end your days in Newgate as a common debtor.'

Hosted by Google

Magdalen clasped her hands together and gazed fearfully at Christopher. The same terrible thought had sometimes occurred to her when she had heard of others going to what might be life-long incarceration in that terrible place—where common debtors were dependent on their friends for the food they ate, and had no allowance from the prison; but, if neglected by their own kindred, were only saved from starvation by the charity of strangers and passers-by, of whom they were sometimes permitted to beg. The bare idea of a debtor's prison was fearful to her. She turned sick with fear, whilst her father gave a meek upward glance as he replied,—'If it be the will of heaven, I must bear it as others have done before me.'

'But it will not be the will of heaven,' was the quick answer; 'it will be naught but your own fault for your slothfulness in business, your foolish, prating ways that busy men cannot stomach, and your vicious habit of decrying your own goods which make men (and no blame to them either) fear to buy them. Who ever heard of a butcher declaring his meat bad

Hosted by Google

because, forsooth, he had the notion that oxen might be reared to give finer flesh ?—or a baker deploring the vileness of his bread because some traveller had told him that in far-off lands flour might be found whiter and purer ? How think you such men would thrive ? Would not folk say that they were more fit for Bedlam than their shops ? And yet it is no different thing that you do daily when you prate and preach of the deficiences in your watches. None better are made, as you know well, and yet you talk as though not one in your shop was fit for a customer to buy ! What wonder that they sally forth in disgust and enter your doors no more. Heaven's will, indeed ! That is the idlest folly man's lips ever spoke yet ! '

Magdalen suddenly rose and crossed over to her father's side, seating herself upon the arm of his chair, and placing her arm about his neck. He understood the gesture well, and drew her toward him with a fond smile, at the same time checking by a look the words he saw hovering on her lips—words of protest against Christopher's harsh strictures. To these Michael himself made reply.

Hosted by Google

'There is truth in your words, I doubt not; but yet they are something over harsh from a youth like yourself when addressed to a white-headed man, some day to be to you a father. I may err somewhat in my method—I deny it not; and yet, how may I truthfully answer when men ask me, are the wares I sell perfect?—I knowing well all the while how imperfect they each one are. How can I say other than I do, striving to make my meaning plain by showing them where it seems to me the method is at fault?'

'And ending by so addling their understanding that all they think is that you are striving to pass off upon them some wretched piece of goods hopelessly unsound. What do they know of arbours, scape-wheels, escapements and the like? What do they care, so long as they get clock or watch to tell them the hour of the day without playing them false? Nothing! Less than nothing; and all your fine words are worse than thrown away, for they only make men think you an imposter and give your shop a bad name.'

'I serve but little in the shop myself,' said

Hosted by Google

Michael meekly, 'and I scarce think my plain speaking has done the harm you think.'

'Something has done harm then; for you scarce do a stroke of business in the day, and in old days it was not so; and when good fortune comes in your way, and some money into your pocket, instead of adding to your stock—and there be many good sales going on just now—you throw your guineas away on importunate paupers. I have scant patience with such methods. I may be young to upbraid one old enough to know the world tenfold better than I do myself. But I say that such weakness and folly will come to no good. Where it will end, if not checked, I have told you once to-night.'

Christopher rose as he spoke. He felt that he was in a bad temper, and that, although right and just in what he said, he was not showing the moderation or good humour he might have done, and he saw well in Magdalen's attitude and manner that her sympathies were entirely with her father.

'I will leave you to-night,' he said abruptly; 'I see that all I say is taken amiss, wherefore I

Hosted by Google

will remove my presence from your roof. In days to come you may see perchance that in all I say I am counselling you for your good. But I have no intention to offend. I will in future hold my peace, however wrong I see things going.'

'Nay, do not so,' answered Michael, with simple dignity; 'I thank you for what you have said to-night (knowing the matter to be kindness, although the manner is something rough), and I would not that there should be betwixt us any but the frankest plain speaking. Good-night, and God bless you, good Christopher. May you prosper better than I have done. And yet, the quiet old ways suit me best, and heaven may yet send brighter days after this time of trial has passed.'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN OF FASHION

THE days that had passed since Marcia's appeal to her father for money, had been on the whole very pleasant ones for the girl. She had never been in such favour with him before. He took more notice of her, spoke more kindly, and smiled more frequently ; and gave her presents of greater value than she had ever dreamed of receiving at his hands. The most astonishing of these was a few yards of amber brocade out of a bale of damaged goods he had bought from a shipowner whose cargo had suffered by fire in the hold. The length he gave his daughter was scorched in some places, but much of it untouched by fire ; and when he bid her see if she could not cut a gown from it so as not to let the injured portions show, she gazed at him amazed ; for such stuff as that was good enough

Hosted by Google

for a lady of the Court, and much too fine for a tradesman's daughter, however prosperous, and she ventured to say as much to her father.

'Tush, child!' he answered carelessly. 'Who wants you to appear abroad in it? What I want is, that you have a smart gown to your back when you come to my customers to display my wares. That colour will become you mightily, and lighten up that dark parlour. Why, if you but show yourself to some rich dame so dressed, she will belike buy all another bale, hoping to look as handsome as you. Go to, wench; do as your father bids you, and waste no time and no words over it. It is my fancy you should look well when my customers come. After all, it is but a bit of play-acting, and you will look the veriest Gipsy queen in yon yellow gown.'

There was never yet a handsome, high-spirited girl who did not like a bit of finery, however small a share in her composition vanity might have. Marcia took the rich yellow fabric up to her mother and told her tale laughingly, whilst the invalid's face brightened, partly at the exhibition of the wonderful brocade, partly

Hosted by Google

at the pleasure caused by her husband's sudden amiability.

'Sure, it is a happy thing for us all this new idea of your father's, Marcia?' she said; 'I have never known him so wondrous smooth-tongued and kind. It brings back to mind the days when he was still courting me, and I was a fine girl, nigh as handsome as you, Marcia, though I never had your stately height and figure—that you get from your father, methinks. But it is a right pleasant thing to please him; so we will work our best at this gay robe. I will fashion it after the manner of robes when I was young. I do not think my poor hands have quite lost their cunning, and this hot weather gives me strength. I warrant me, we will have you fine enough to please your father, ere long. Bring me my scissors, and let us fall to with no farther parley.'

Poor, crippled Martha Brayling had been in her day an expert in the art of dress-making (as we call it now), and had met Nicholas in the way of business, when she made up the costly fabrics that he imported and sold. As his wife, she had plied her trade amongst a few

Hosted by Google

of his richer customers, until her failing health obliged her to desist from work; and the love for handling rich fabrics and fashioning them into graceful garments would last as long as her life. It was a real delight to her to design and to make this dress for her daughter, and the effect of the whole thing, when completed, was so satisfactory that Nicholas beamed with pleasure, and caressed his daughter, calling her a 'wondrous comely wench,' and even condescending to kiss his wife and compliment her on the skill and taste she had shown.

Marcia felt something like a jackdaw in borrowed plumes as she surveyed her tall and graceful figure in the flowing amber robe that seemed suddenly to transform her into a different being from the silk-mercer's daughter in Fleet Street. But that the robe became her marvellously well she could not deny, and when summoned below on the arrival of a fashionable lady with her mother, a stylish old dowager, she was stared at for all the world as though she were an inanimate block, and turned round and round to show off the beauties of the fabric, whilst the ladies commented

Hosted by Google

upon it and her in a fashion that entertained her vastly.

The mercer, in his blandest tones, explained how his wife had contrived the robe out of damaged pieces, so as the better to display its many beauties; and the ladies ended by carrying off the rest of the bale at about twice the price that Nicholas had given for it. Certainly Marcia's dark beauty was wonderfully set off by the vivid yet delicate colour, and the mercer had artfully persuaded the ladies that their own charms would be equally enhanced, a point doubtful indeed to minds not blinded by vanity.

His success put him into a vastly good temper, and when another lady, coming in to purchase Indian shawls, begged Master Nicholas to try and procure for her some more of the amber brocade in which his daughter was still arrayed, his satisfaction visibly increased. He had noticed before that his daughter's beauty and grace were helping to sell his wares. To-day there could be no manner of doubt on the point, and he was inordinately satisfied.

Business hours were nearly over, and Marcia suggested taking off her gay dress and going

Hosted by Google

to her mother; but her father answered quickly,—

'Nay, keep on the robe. I may want you later; but go to your mother for the nonce, and brew her a dish of tea. I will ring the bell when I require your presence again. Then, come without delay; and come in your fine garment.'

Marcia stood hesitating a moment, a look of distaste upon her face, and then she said as boldly as she could,—

'Sure, father, no more ladies will visit you this evening. And this robe is stiff and cumbersome. May I not lay it aside?'

'No, wench, you may not!' answered her father sharply. 'I am looking for a visitor and I may have need of you, and I will have you wear what I bid you.'

Parental authority had all the force of law in those days, and it was a bold daughter who stood up in rebellion against her father. Marcia said no more, but went up to her mother with a clouded face, and sinking down in a chair at the bed-side said,—

'Mother, I fear me there will be gentlemen

Hosted by Google

with father to-night, and that he will want me. I like it not, there was no talk of that when first I sought to serve him. He spoke of Court dames; and, in faith, I like well to watch their antic ways and fashionable grimaces, and to hear their fine mincing talk. But, methinks, with the gallants I have no concern. I heeded them little at the first; but they grow more bold now that they see me come and go so oft. They speak to me and pass fine compliments that I mislike and know not how to answer. Mother, it is not good for a girl to be looked at and spoken to thus. Can you not speak to my father? He will not listen to me.'

'Alack, my child, and when did he ever listen to me? I shall but anger him, and all this pleasant time of peace will be marred and over. Can you not bear it patiently awhile, for my sake? If I interfere between you he will be cruel again to me, and his anger I sorely dread.'

Marcia was silent, and her only answer was a heavy sigh. Well she knew the weakness of her mother and the violent temper of her father, and could not wonder that the timid invalid

Hosted by Google

feared to arouse it. And she had as yet no very strong ground of complaint. No one had insulted her. No one had attempted any unwarrantable liberty. Flattery and high-flown praise was the fashion of the day. Compliments, couched in magniloquent language, fell from the lips of gallants as naturally as the oaths which interlarded their speech, and were looked upon as a mark of good-breeding. Her father was always present. He would naturally declare that that fact alone would secure her from unwelcome approaches, that he would be the first to resent a word or look which tended to over-familiarity. Yet Marcia had but the very faintest confidence in her father's protection. For the men that came to his parlour were all men of wealth or expectations, and to say or do anything to offend one of them, or drive the fly from the meshes of the spider's web, would be against every article of his unwritten creed.

Marcia began to have a lurking fear that her beauty, of which she had suddenly become more conscious, hearing it spoken of freely by her father's friends and customers, was being used

Hosted by Google

by her father for his own ends; and instinct told her that to attempt to reason with him would be worse than useless. The overpowering greed for gold had long been a passion in the heart of Nicholas. Marcia could not reason calmly about it, or analyse his character or her own strong instincts of aversion and disgust. She only knew that she had suddenly become involved in a maze of perplexity, from which she saw no outlet. Her mother could not help her; her father was the cause and source of all her trouble. It was terribly galling and humiliating, and before the girl had time to arrive at any conclusion as to her own course of action, her father's bell below rang sharply, and her mother besought her to go to him instantly. It could do no manner of good to anger him by rebellion. He would only come and fetch her, and keep her all the longer as a punishment.

Marcia knew this only too well. In that house her father's will was law. She rose at once and went slowly down the stairs, pushing open the door and entering the lighted room with a look of proud, cold dignity, which suited so well her style of beauty and the magnificent

Hosted by Google

robe she wore, that her father fairly rubbed his hands in delight, and said to himself that such a daughter, properly trained, would make his fortune.

There was only one person in the room with Nicholas, and that was a fine young gallant, dressed in the height of fashion, who was sitting in an easy attitude by the table, his bold, brown eyes fixed intently upon the beautiful Marcia. His broad-brimmed hat, upon which reposed a heap of white feathers, lay upon the table, and his magnificent periwig floated round his face and down to his shoulders. Rich bands of lace enveloped his neck, and his white velvet doublet was richly adorned with gold lace, as was also the short cloak which depended from his shoulder. He wore the wide 'petticoat-breeches' so much in vogue just then with the dandies of the day, which puffed out beneath the doublet, and were adorned by rows of riband above the knee, and deep lace ruffles beneath. Silken hose, and shoes adorned with buckles and tied with riband completed the costume, and it was plain that the young exquisite had dropped in at the mercer's on his way to some fashionable gathering; and

Hosted by Google

those who best knew the state of young Lord Hartsbourne's exchequer would have been able to hazard a shrewd guess as to the nature of the young man's errand.

Nicholas's parlour, which by day was dull and dark, and looked like a place given over to business alone, presented a different aspect when the daylight waned and business hours were over. Then a rich curtain was drawn across the window, wax candles in silver sconces adorned the walls, and gave a soft and pleasing light. A few pieces of rich drapery arranged here and there, changed in a moment the aspect of the place, and the best of a very remarkable cellar of wine was always at the disposal of the evening clients of the master.

Nicholas was as little like the proverbial money-lender in his ways as in his aspect. He assumed no appearance of miser-like poverty. He did not receive clients in a dismal den suggestive of the web of the crafty spider. If he set snares, at least they were baited attractively. If he lured the unwary into his den, at least he made that den a pleasant enough place of resort. His guests liked him, they almost trusted him,

Hosted by Google

and he was winning exactly that kind of celebrity which was most likely to contribute to his success in life.

'Marcia,' said her father as the girl entered, 'Lord Hartsbourne will drink a cup of that red Spanish wine which I gave into your charge the other day. Go fetch him a bumper, girl, and make haste, for he has no time to spare.'

Marcia crossed the room with her proud, graceful step, and brought forth from a little inner chamber, scarce larger than a cupboard, the goblet of wine, presenting it to the Viscount, who took it from her hand with a low bow, making many fine speeches about the ambrosia of the gods, and the sweetness of any nectar thus presented. Marcia, penned into her corner by the young gallant and her father, who chanced to have placed themselves so as to bar her retreat, stood silently by whilst the guest quaffed the sparkling wine, and turned empty compliments with every sip. But foolish as were the fine speeches, and little as they might mean in the mouth of one of the courtiers of that period, there was no mistaking the bold admiration of the glances thrown upon the beautiful girl, as

Hosted by Google

she stood in proud silence, neither smiling, nor blushing, nor simpering, but regarding the young coxcomb with a clear, direct glance, that betokened indifference to his attractions, and a distaste of his address, that could not but pique a man accustomed to be smiled upon by the fair ladies of his acquaintance.

Nicholas looked on with bent brows, taking shrewd heed to the little scene, angry at first with his daughter for her lack of manners, as he termed it, and resolving to upbraid her and rate her soundly as soon as the guest had gone, but gradually coming to the conclusion that this proud reserve and silence were perhaps a better bait than the smiles and coy glances which many maidens would have bestowed upon such an admirer. It was plain that Lord Hartsbourne could not take his eyes off the girl as she stood before him, stately, irresponsive, icily cold, the soft light falling upon her shimmering draperies, her wonderful hair, and the deep, dark eyes that looked as mysterious as water at night. The usurer rubbed his hands softly together and smiled to himself, and resolved to wait awhile ere he chid his daughter for the cold-

Hosted by Google

ness and dignity which became her beauty so well.

The Viscount could not stay that night. He was going to the house of some fashionable friends, and already had been furnished with the sinews of war by the obliging Nicholas. After stringing together compliments so fulsome and flowery that it was a marvel human lips could be found to frame them so glibly, he possessed himself of one of the strong white hands hanging listlessly by Marcia's side, and pressed his lips upon it, and then, emboldened by her immobility, he took one step nearer and saluted her on the cheek.

A kiss between a man and woman in those days was by no means the sign of affection and intimacy that it has since become. Indeed it was a common enough salutation between equals, and a century ago had been almost universal; but between those of different rank it had never become common or lost its significance, and the girl's olive cheek flamed crimson, and her dark eyes flashed fire.

'Sir!' she said in a very low voice, 'How dare you?'

Hosted by Google

'Sweetest and fairest mistress, ten hundred thousand pardons if I have offended you; but the temptation was too great, human nature cannot withstand such loveliness. On my knees I pray you pardon me—'

'Nay, my lord, I will have no kneeling to me, answered Marcia with cold dignity. 'I pray you only to be gone. I desire no fine speeches, and I pardon no liberties. Fare-you-well.'

'Then I must fain come again to make my peace and win my pardon,' said the gallant, as he left the room with her father, looking back with a careless grace that only served to heighten Marcia's displeasure. She would have fled before her father's return, but her blood being hot she felt she could better speak to him now than later. She felt certain he would be angry with her, but at that moment she did not care. Her feelings had been outraged, she felt humiliated and insulted, and she was in such a mood that her father's anger would affect her little. She waited for his return without moving from her place, and then spoke quietly and resolutely.

'Father, I will not be insulted. I will not be

Hosted by Google

so spoken to—so saluted. I will not come into this room again when you have gentlemen with you. I will serve the ladies—you can deal with the gallants.'

She expected to be met by a burst of anger; but, to her great surprise, her father only laughed and patted her cheek quite amiably.

'Well, well, child, we will see; we will see. It is needless to think too much of such trifles. Had you not led the life of a nun you would be less disturbed by a bit of passing gallantry which means no more than a puff of summer breeze, and is just the small current coin that passes among our betters like the groats and pence in the market. But for all that I like your spirit right well. It will do the young coxcombs no harm to get a cuff when they look for a blush or a kiss. Thou hast a fine spirit, my wench, and I chide thee not for thy temper. Thou hast it from thy father, and thou didst well to let the curled young jackenapes see he is not to have everything his own way.'

To receive praise instead of blame was rather disconcerting to Marcia in her present mood. She was glad to avoid a quarrel that would dis-

Hosted by Google

tress her mother, but it was difficult to know what to say next.

'You will remember what I have said, father,' she remarked as she moved slowly towards the door;' I will not come here again when Lord Hartsbourne is with you.'

'We will see about that, my wench; we will see about that,' was the answer still spoken amiably; 'we must not make up our minds all at once about that. If you wish to help your friends next door, you must expect to have a few disagreeables to put up with. No good work is ever carried through without.'

Marcia paused and hesitated, wondering what he meant. Nicholas saw his opportunity, and went on in the same easy tone.

'You want to earn golden guineas to help your friends—good; and I will help you to that end, so as you help me too. I have my reasons for wishing Lord Hartsbourne's visits here. His father, the old Earl of Chelsea, is lying on his death-bed. He may linger long, but he will never rise from it again. Lord Hartsbourne is now a penniless young spendthrift, whom even his own father is weary of helping; but in a few

Hosted by Google

months' time he will be one of the richest peers in England; and he has no objection in the world to trade upon his future prospects, knowing that even the heavy debt running up in my books will be but a flea-bite in the enormous fortune he is heir to. Now, do you understand why I welcome his visits, and desire him to repeat them often. Every time he comes he costs me a hundred guineas or more; but if in a short while I get for every guinea three, is not that worth some striving and scheming? And, as he truly says, one guinea to him now is worth more than ten when he comes into his estates, so that we are both satisfied with our dealings together.'

Marcia's face was coldly expressionless. This explanation of her father's aims and methods seemed to her infinitely degrading. She would have been yet more disgusted had she realised the part she was expected to play in luring this giddy youth to her father's house, but he passed lightly over that, and dwelt on the point so near her heart.

'Young folk, be they men or women, like the companionship of their equals in age, and like

Hosted by Google

things bright and cheerful. Lord Hartsbourne is pleased to receive a stoop of wine from your hands, and show off his fine clothes to any pair of bright eyes, whilst he turns an empty phrase or so almost without a thought. Wherefore, child, if you will do my bidding and be not led away by false shame and the prudery that mistakes itself for modesty, and bring the wine and do my will, I will reward you for your service by giving you wherewithal to help your friends. But, if not, you may go your own way, and my gold will go another; for I will have no contumacious folly in my house, and the girl who disobeys her father may e'en find some other shelter for her head. And now, go. You know me for a man of my word. What I promise I perform. You can make yourself rich in my lifetime if you will, and help your friends to boot; or you can beggar yourself and make yourself an outcast, which ever best pleases your whimsies and your pride.'

Nicholas did not speak angrily, though there was some severity in the tone of his later words, and Marcia went up to her room in a maze of perplexity and doubt. She did not go to her

Hosted by Google

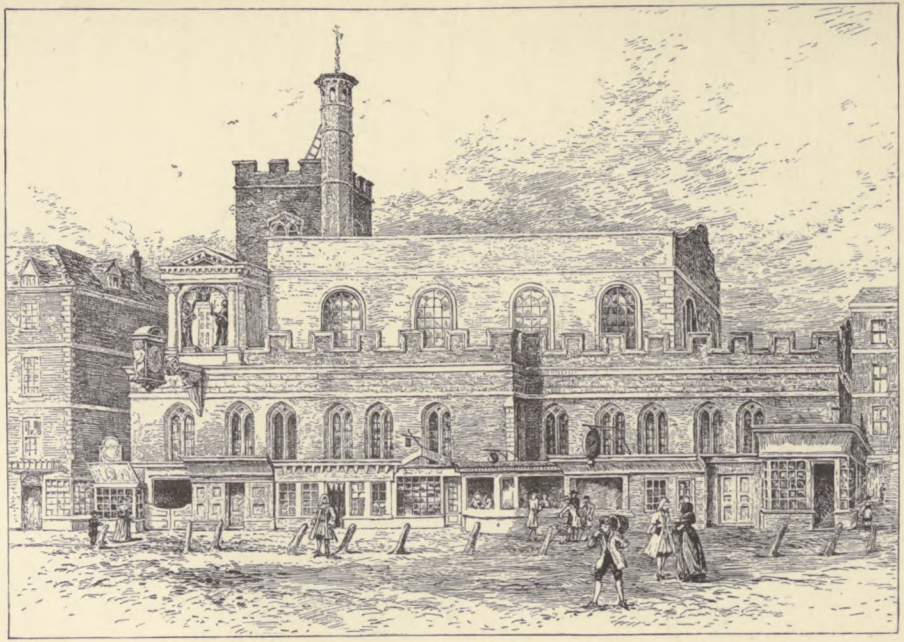
mother with her trouble, or speak a word of it when she settled her for the night. It was a thing she must think out for herself. And everything seemed in a tangle.

'Perhaps St Dunstan's clock will help me,' said Marcia, as she laid her tired head upon the pillow at last. 'To-morrow is Saturday, and I shall have a quiet talk with Magdalen.'

The meaning of this speech was, that Saturday was Michael's day for winding up the church clock, and neither his daughter nor Marcia ever missed seeing him perform this duty if they could possibly help it. The troubles and cares of the week seemed to grow dimmer when they found themselves within that mysterious region of wheels and pulleys and cranks which formed the inside of the clock.

Michael, who loved the mechanism with the love of the inventor, always spent a full hour in examining every part of it, going over every wheel and cog and pallet, and making sure that all was in perfect order for the ensuing week's work. If he found the least defect, he would sit up all night to remedy it. It would have seemed to him and to the two girls an ominous

Hosted by Google



OLD ST. DUNSTAN'S IN THE WEST.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

thing for St Dunstan's clock to stop. The end of time might almost have been expected to come next.

Sitting on a beam, and watching the familiar figure of the old man moving about with his lamp and making his weekly examination, the girls had all their lives been wont to exchange their most private confidences, and now, though Marcia felt that she could not speak of all that was in her heart to Magdalen (seeing that it was in some sort for her she was like to suffer), she imparted something of the trouble — her sorrow at her father's usurious ways ; her dislike to the guests he wished her to amuse and entertain ; her detestation of the gallantries of the Viscount, and her doubt whether or no she could be justified in disobeying and defying her father.

Magdalen listened with truest sympathy, knowing nothing of the golden guineas which Marcia hoped some day to pour into her lap ; only pitying any girl with so hard a choice before her, and wondering what she should do were her father to threaten her as Nicholas had threatened Marcia.

Hosted by Google

And Marcia, following the glance of those trusting blue eyes saw them light with a look of unspeakable love upon the fine chiselled face and silver hair of the old clockmaker, lighted up by the rays of the lamp which he carried, and the tears sprang to her own as she exclaimed,—

'Ah, if I had such a father as that!'

So Magdalen went home, feeling that there were troubles in the world harder than that of poverty; whilst Marcia felt better for that hour of peace and quiet, and for the assurance it had brought her that the greedy rush for gold did not absorb all lives, and that it might be given to man to walk unspotted through the world, though in that world he might be looked upon as of small account—and even as one who had failed in life.

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER VII

SURLY STEVE

It was a hot, breathless evening, late in August. The sun had been shining all day with that pitiless glare that accompanies a dry and scorching east wind. Trade had been slack throughout the city that day. The general languor and oppression seemed to have penetrated to the very centres of business. The streets were too hot to tempt pedestrians forth, and the 'prentices at the shop doors cried their wares in vain.

It was a relief when the great fiery ball sank lower in the sky. Dick stood out in the middle of the street gaping vacantly at the bronze figures of Gog and Magog, who alone seemed unaffected by the weather, and smote their bells with unfailing regularity and precision. Through Temple Bar poured a flood of golden, westerly sunshine, and the gate-way, with its Grecian pillars and central arch for coaches, looked, to

Hosted by Google

the idle imagination of the boy, like a golden gate-way to heaven. Old Temple Bar was very different from the gate-way once so familiar to us, with its sculptured figures and decorations. It was heavier and more massive in appearance, though, in reality, built of timber. The shadow of it was projected to Dick's very feet, as he stood in his favourite station beneath St Dunstan's clock, and it seemed to the boy as though this part of Fleet Street grew darker than any other as the shades of evening drew on.

Dick was slightly less rubicund and stout than he had been a few weeks back. This first summer spent in the confined air of the city had told upon him somewhat, as had also the excitements of city life and his own private hopes, fears and uncertainties. His open generous nature led him into many troubles. He was overflowing with sympathy for his master and young mistress, and longed to serve them in every possible way. But they had gently, yet firmly, forbidden his writing home for any more good things to be consumed at their table, and it did not seem to Dick as though any other way of helping them was open to him at present.

Hosted by Google

He had been pondering a good deal upon this knotty point as he stood in the street watching the passers-by and the clock, but no bright ideas had come to him. The only satisfaction he had in the present was that Christopher and his young mistress did not appear to come much nearer together as time passed by. The merchant paid regular visits to the watchmaker's house, and was always kindly received; but a certain constraint was visible in his manner and in that of Magdalen. The old man was most at ease. He seemed to have not only forgiven but forgotten any cause of offence, and he prosed away gently to his silent guest about the matters dear to his heart. But Magdalen often sat apart with her work and said nothing, and Christopher was frequently silent and gloomy. Dick would then be thoroughly cheerful and content, and would show the visitor out at last with an ill-suppressed grin of joy on his chubby face. It seemed to him that this kind of courtship at cross-purposes could not go on for ever. Christopher would begin to think he could do better for himself than by wedding the portionless daughter of a man scarcely able to make headway in the world of

Hosted by Google

business, and Magdalen would grow to distrust the man who was unwilling to help her, and who plainly despised the father she adored. Dick opined that things were working round to suit his own purpose mightily well and by industry and attention to business was making himself of more use to Michael than any previous apprentice he had had, and winning kindly smiles and gentle words from his young mistress.

Dick was therefore somewhat more happy than he had been a few weeks back, though the living was scanty, anxieties plentiful, and the want of money more and more felt as each week passed by. No rent had been paid to master Nicholas at Midsummer, and it appeared very doubtful if there would be any forthcoming at Michaelmas with trade so stagnant as it had been all the summer. How Dick longed to compel the fine passers-by in their coaches to stop at his master's door and purchase his wares out of their well-filled purses! It seemed a cruel thing that none of them thought of doing this, and rattled so carelessly by. Dick resolved that if ever he were rich, he would go about spending his money in quarters where the need was great. What happiness could be

Hosted by Google

thus dispensed if only people would take the trouble to go through life with open eyes!

The waning of the sunlight reminded Dick of his daily duties, and he ran back towards the shop to put up the shutters. As he approached he was aware of the sound of angry voices proceeding from just inside the doorway. He heard Steve's voice raised in its rasping, surly tones, and Dick wondered to whom he was speaking.

Just outside the door, listening with folded arms to what passed within, was Christopher, who had evidently just come upon the scene. It did not appear as though he were the person to whom Steve was giving a taste of his tongue, and assurance on this point was made doubly sure by the rapid exit from the shop of a gentleman, looking very flushed and angry.

'Very good, my man,' he was saying in loud tones, 'I shall know now very well where *not* to come in the future, and what shop in Fleet Street to advise my friends to eschew. A pretty pass things are coming to truly, if a gentleman is to be treated with insolent abuse by a varlet shopman, and all forsooth because he is a little

Hosted by Google

later than ordinary business hours. I promise you that neither I nor any friends of mine shall ever darken these doors again!'

So saying, the irate customer brushed past Christopher, who stepped back a pace to let him go by, and the former, with a quick gesture as of apology for his brusqueness, paused for a moment to say,—

'Pardon me, sir, I did not see you so close at hand. Were you proposing to enter this shop? In faith I counsel you to do no such thing. There is an idle knave within who is like to be set in the pillory one of these days for the free use he makes of his tongue. If he were a servant of mine I would have him whipped round the town ere I would suffer him to drive custom away from my doors in such a fashion.'

And the bluff gentleman, who plainly had a sufficiently hot temper of his own, bustled away down the street muttering angrily to himself, whilst Steve emerged from the shop door with a shutter in his hands, and an expression of ill-concealed triumph on his saturnine face.

As the man put the shutter in its place, Christopher laid a firm hand upon his shoulder.

Hosted by Google

'How now, thou ill-conditioned, prating varlet! What is this I hear of thee? Driving away thy master's customers, forsooth, with thy foul tongue and scurrilous language? Pretty doings truly for one who eats his master's bread, and receives his master's money, and is here to carry on the business and to help the trade to grow and increase! What have you got to say for yourself, Steve Anderson? A fine story there will be for the master, who is fool enough to leave his concerns in such hands.'

'You're not my master, anyway, and I'll none of your interference!' shouted Steve, his dark face clouding over with suppressed passion as he roughly shook off the young merchant's hand, and gave him an evil look over his shoulder. 'Who are you to dare to lay hands on me? I'll knock you into yon gutter if you dare to touch me again. Master Michael Widdrington is my master, and to him I'll answer for all I say and do; and to no man else. It's fine words you have on your tongue, Master Popinjay, but it all begins and ends with fine words where you are concerned. I'd like to know how much you have done, or mean to do to help my master in

Hosted by Google

his troubles? It's easy to stand throwing stones at other folk. Why don't you open your purse and let him see the colour of your gold, since times are so bad?'

And the man broke into an angry laugh, which did not cease any the sooner for Christopher's change of countenance.

In truth, the young merchant looked not a little put out. He was bitterly angry with Steve for his treatment of the customer, and this utterly unexpected attack upon himself—exposing what he knew to be the weak point in his present course of conduct, and that in the hearing of any of the neighbours who might chance to be standing beside their windows, or of the passers-by in the street—was mortifying to the last degree. Had the fellow been just a little less powerfully built, and a little less ready with his fists, Christopher would have set upon him and inflicted chastisement, as was frequently done in those days, when no great account was made of hard blows given or received. But in this case the chances were all in favour of the shopman, whose arms were like a blacksmith's, and whose fame as a pugilist was well known

Hosted by Google

throughout the neighbourhood. Nobody willingly provoked an encounter with the black-browed, evil-tempered man, and the young merchant felt that he should be only courting insult and injury by attempting condign punishment.

'You will end your days in a prison—mark my words—and the sooner you get your deserts the better it will be for all in this house,' said Christopher, biting his lips to keep back the tide of angry words. He would have liked to utter them, but had a dread of more plain speaking from the man, who was certainly no respecter of persons.

Steve turned on his heel, and went to fetch another shutter, whilst Christopher, seeing Dick for the first time standing by, asked of him in friendlier tones than he was wont to address to the boy,—

'Is your master within?'

'I think not,' answered Dick, 'but he will be here anon. It is his day for winding St Dunstan's clock. But he went some time back, and as the light wanes, Mistress Magdalen will surely bring him home. See, there they come together!' and the boy pointed towards the

Hosted by Google

angle of the old church, round which appeared three figures, the two girl friends a little in advance, the tall bending figure of Michael bringing up the rear.

Marcia and Magdalen parted at the door, and the latter turned with an eager smile towards her lover; for despite the coolness which had arisen between them they loved each other well, and each time that they met, Magdalen hoped that the mist would be dispelled, and the clouds vanish from her sky. She indulged a hope that Christopher would some day surprise them by an unexpected offer of help, and she clung to that hope despite all disappointments, and looked for brighter days to come.

'Well met, Christopher!' she exclaimed, extending her hand, her eyes lighting up; 'I am right glad to see you. Have you been awaiting us long? You know that it is father's day for St Dunstan's.'

'I had forgot; but no matter. It is well I came when I did. I have heard somewhat that it behoves your father to know. We will speak of it when we are alone. It may be the saving yet of your father's decaying business.'

Hosted by Google

Magdalen looked eagerly at him, but he said no more then, turning to greet Michael more warmly than was his wont, and all passing together into the dark shop, and so up the staircase to the parlour where the frugal supper was laid.

Dick lingered behind a few moments to see if Steve was in a mood to talk. He was divided in mind which side to take in the quarrel. It was impossible to approve the surliness of the shopman towards customers, which drove them in a fury from the door; but yet, Christopher's high-handed interference was a thing which Dick's quick temper could not readily brook, and he would much rather have fought against him than with him.

'What made you turn yon gentleman out of the shop, Steve?' asked the boy, as he covered up the clocks, and put away the counter-wares into their respective places. 'He might have bought goods, and that would have been a good thing this slack day.'

'Maybe; but folk should come at the right hour to buy goods,' was the sullen answer. 'And they should keep a civil tongue in their heads, too, whilst they are about it.'

Hosted by Google

'I doubt if you did that yourself, Steve,' said Dick, unable to help laughing at such a charge.

Steve scowled and growled, but he was on good terms with Dick in the main, and did not resent the charge.

'How was I like to keep one when I was badgered like a black slave, and all because I was out of the shop, getting the shutters up, and didn't hear this fine gentleman come in. He was banging his stick on the floor as if he would have knocked the floor in; and when I came, he launched such a flood of ill words at me, that for very shame I had to answer him back, and tell him that folk as was in such a mighty hurry to be served should come at proper hours, and that I was going to shut the shop up, and he had better get out quicker than he came. I was doing my master's business, and I wasn't going to stop it to wait on foul-tongued folk like he.'

'Body o' me! Did you say all that? Marry, it is no wonder he went out in a rage!' cried Dick, half displeased, half admiring, for the defiant boldness of the speaker had its attractions for him, whilst his common sense and

Hosted by Google

business instinct told him that it was both absurd and impolitic to take such a tone with a customer, even if the latter had given some ground for passing irritation. It was not pleasant to be hectored by a stranger; but it was not right to drive trade from the master's door, least of all just now, when things were so bad.

Dick, however, could not stay to argue the matter out then. Steve, having finished his day's duty, departed for his own abode hard by, whilst Magdalen's voice was heard calling the apprentice to supper, and he eagerly ran upstairs, hoping to hear Christopher's version of the affair.

But the matter was not alluded to in his presence, and, as he volunteered to wash up the supper things instead of merely assisting his mistress in this office, he only caught disjointed scraps of the talk that followed as he went to and fro with his loads.

'Master Michael,' began Christopher, when the meal was ended, and the old man had taken his accustomed easy chair and had filled his pipe from the pouch offered him by Christopher, who knew that the indulgence was restricted to those

Hosted by Google

occasions when he supplied the tobacco—'I have somewhat of a serious nature to say to you.'

Magdalen looked up eagerly from her needle, and seemed to hold her breath, whilst the old man merely nodded his head gently, and replied,—

'Say on then, good Christopher.'

'You remember, doubtless, that some short while since I upbraided you for your methods of doing business, and told you that therein lay the secret of your declining trade? You remember that?'

'I remember it well. Doubtless there was much sound truth in it,' answered the humble-minded old man meekly.

'There was less of truth in it than I believed when I spoke the words, and I desire now to recall them,' responded Christopher, speaking briskly and with energy. 'I beg to ask your pardon for the accusation I brought against you, and which I maintained with more heat than was becoming for a man of my age when addressing him who has all but the right to the title of father. You will not deny me your pardon, good sir?'

Hosted by Google

'Nay, nay; there is no pardon due in the matter,' answered Michael, quite taken aback at hearing this apology from the lips of one so proud and self-sufficient as young Christopher. 'I misdoubt me but there was much of truth in them. Look at the business—that tells its tale. Things were not so a few years back when I had more strength and energy.'

'Good Master Michael, your lack of strength and energy is what comes to most men as they grow old, and yet we do not see that they greatly lose in worldly substance thereby. Believe me, there is another cause at work in this matter, and one which needs well considering. I made a timely discovery to-day. In your absence and that of his mistress, taking a cowardly advantage of his position of trust, I found your man, Steve Anderson, driving, forsooth, an honest and well-to-do customer from your door—driving him forth with scurrilous abuse and foul epithets, till the good gentleman went away vowing never to approach the door again, or to let his friends do likewise, Steve calling abuse after him down the street, and making your quiet shop a scene of disgraceful altercation'

Hosted by Google

A troubled look crept over Michael's face. Magdalen dropped her work in her lap, and listened with dilated eyes.

'The poor fellow has always suffered through his ungovernable temper,' said the old man gently. 'I think he strives against the sin in himself, but it breaks out ever and anon in spite of all. Still, we must be patient with him—we must be patient.'

'And whilst you are patient, waiting for the cure that will never come, your business is driven from your doors, and you and your daughter are beggared. No, no, Master Michael, it will not do. This is much too serious a matter to be taken easily and trifled with. You must send the man away. You must pack him off without loss of time; and whilst business is thus slack, you may even try a while to dispense with a man, and do your own selling with the help of yon boy, who seems a bright and handy lad, with the making of a man of business in him. But whatever happens in the future, one thing is sure: Anderson must be forthwith dispatched, and go about his business. He has done you untold harm as it is, I cannot doubt. To sit idle

Hosted by Google

whilst he ruins you, would be simple madness and folly.'

'Indeed, dear father, I verily believe that Christopher is right,' said Magdalen, raising her soft voice timidly as Michael sat silent and unresponsive. 'I hear a good deal as I sit in the balcony or go my way about the house, and many a time do I hear angry voices in the shop, and know that Steve is storming at some one there. If he does not storm he is so sullen and gruff that he offends customers, and they go away without buying. Many times have I heard them speak words to each other as they went their way, which told me they would have bought your wares had it not been for the cross-grained words and looks they got from Steve. I have often wished to tell you all; but it went against me to speak ill of one who has been so long beneath our roof. But indeed, father, it cannot be right that we lose all through Steve's ill-temper. Christopher is right there.'

'Ay, verily, there can be no doubt about it,' said the young merchant, speaking the more readily as he saw that Magdalen was on his side. 'I am glad indeed that I came this evening

Hosted by Google

to hear the man thus storming. It would give any house an ill name to retain such an inmate.'

'Nay, I trow that my house bears no ill name, yet I have had Steve within it these twenty years,' said Michael, with gentle dignity. 'And I will speak with Steve. I will speak with him most seriously, but I will not drive him from my doors. He has served me too long to be so treated at the last.'

'Served you — ay, verily he has! And a pretty turn he has served you, withal. Driven away custom, ruined the business.'

'Nay, nay, good Christopher; have a little patience, have a little reason. It was I who had driven away the business when last you spoke on this same subject. Then you could not chide me too sharply for my evil method. Be not unjust to poor Steve; I too am to blame. We must strive both to mend our ways together.'

'But, father—'

'Well, my daughter; surely thou art not going to turn against poor Steve, when thou callest to mind his services only one short year back?

Magdalen hung her head in silence, whilst Christopher looked up sharply to say,—

Hosted by Google

'And what, pray, were they, that he should have the right to bring ruin upon this house as an after-recompense?'

'I will tell you what they were,' answered Michael quietly, 'and you may then judge for yourself how I feel towards the man. I need not remind you of the scourge of last year—the memory of which is fresh in the minds of all. Amongst the early victims of that terrible plague were poor Steve's wife and all his children—not one of whom was left to comfort him—all being taken within a week of each other, and thrown together into a common grave. Steve did not fall a victim to the pest, and became one of the watchmen to guard infected houses; for I need not remind you that no business was done for many months, and, from the moment the plague broke out at his house, he came not to mine. Magdalen and I remained here in this house, not indeed having the means to fly; and for long it seemed as though we were to escape the scourge, for the summer passed by and we took it not; and men were beginning to say that it was abating and leaving the stricken city, ere I began to feel those pains

Hosted by Google

in my limbs and that heaviness in my head, of which I had heard but too much; and, before the day had passed, I was lying stricken as if for death, and Magdalen alone in the house—helpless, terrified, and utterly ignorant what to do and what to leave undone. And then Steve came to her help. He was never long without seeking news of us. He came that night, and from that moment her worst fears ceased. He knew what to do for me; he knew where to obtain all that was needed for the stricken household; he established himself by my bedside, and he nursed me night and day. I owe my life to Steve Anderson; but for him my daughter would be fatherless. After that, judge for yourself whether I may dismiss him from my service for a fault of temper which I have known all these years, and which is no worse to-day than when he came to me.'

Magdalen's head was bent. The memory of those terrible scenes which she had tried of late to forget, came over her now and rendered her dumb and repentant. She saw but too clearly her lover's side of the question, but how could she take part against Steve in face of all that

Hosted by Google

he had done for them? She looked appealingly at Christopher, and he answered by a slight expressive movement of the shoulders.

The young man realised that, after telling that tale, Michael was scarcely in the mood to listen to farther strictures upon its hero. It was, altogether, a difficult and tiresome piece of business; but Christopher did not despair, even now. Something must be done, that was plain. If the watchmaker was to be saved from hopeless ruin, and if, as was self-evident, Anderson's temper was the cause of so much trouble to all, means must be found of getting rid of him, and that quickly.

'Your father is very simple-minded, kind-hearted, and weak,' said the merchant to his sweetheart, as Magdalen came to light him out through the dark shop; 'and that fellow trades upon his goodness. He knows that he laid you beneath a burden of gratitude when he came to you in your trouble, and he trusts to that to save him from well-deserved dismissal. Your father would rather stand still and be brought to beggary than exert himself to stave it off. Some men are made like that; and, of

Hosted by Google

all dispositions, that is the hardest to cope with. They let themselves be deluded and imposed upon by their menials and dependents, and think their weakness is Christian patience and long-suffering. They ruin their servants, so that no other person would employ them, whilst they think all the while that they are exercising praiseworthy patience. But the time will come when there will be an awakening, and we must do what we can to open your poor father's eyes. Do not give up hope; for I mean to get that fellow out of the house before I am many weeks older!'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER VIII

A PITIFUL APPEAL

'MOTHER, mother, can you not help me?'

'Alack, my child, what can I do?'

'It seems as though a mother should be able to save her own child from degradation and insult. O mother, can you not speak to my father?'

'My beloved child, I have said everything that I dare. But where it is a question of money-getting with your father, you know, as well as I do, how vain are words to change his purpose.'

Marcia's dark eyes flashed. She had torn off the amber robe once so gladly and proudly fashioned, and it lay in a shining heap upon the floor. She spurned it with her foot as she walked to and fro in her excitement.

'I will never put it on again,' she muttered

Hosted by Google

between her clenched teeth. 'No—not though a hundred fathers bid me!'

A terrified look came over the pale face of the woman on the bed.

'O my daughter, you will not defy your father?'

'I will not be insulted by my father's friends and customers!' answered the girl proudly; 'I will not—no, I will not!'

'O my child, be reasonable—be not so easily roused to fear and wrath. Your father says that nought passes betwixt you and those fine young gentlemen, but a little jesting which fine ladies at Court would but laugh at and delight in. I pray you, child, be careful how you anger your father. What will become of me, if you anger him as I know well he can be angered. If the fashionable ladies at Court take pleasure in such foolish talk and jesting, why should you fear and loathe it so greatly? Nay, my daughter, strive after patience and submission. It is the duty of the daughter to please her parents. Obedience is the first and greatest lesson we have to learn.'

'Mother, I have tried to obey—I have tried

Hosted by Google

to be patient; but I cannot and will not suffer myself to be the bait whereby my father lures his victims to their destruction. Mother, I have seen and heard too much these past weeks. I was a child when first I went to help my father; I am a woman now, and my womanhood rebels against what I am forced to see and hear. You talk of Court ladies and their ways—am I one of them? What is it to me how they speak and act? I am a daughter of the people, and the men who come to gaze on me and pass their unmeaning compliments, know that as well as I do. They think they can speak and look as they will, because I am not their equal, because I have perforce to hold my peace and to do my father's bidding. They think, because they do business with him, that his daughter is in some sort their slave. Mother, it is hateful; it is more than I can stand! And when Lord Hartsbourne comes, it is worse than all. The very sight of his handsome face sickens me!'

'Marcia, Marcia!' wailed the sick woman, 'how thou dost talk and rave! Thy father thinks more of Lord Hartsbourne than of any other who comes to the house. He speaks daily

Hosted by Google

in his praise, and, i' faith, by all I hear, he seems a mighty likely youth.'

'Ay, because he spends money like water—money that he borrows from my father,' answered Marcia quietly, and with a look of extreme repulsion upon her face. 'And for every pound he borrows now, he will have to pay three when his father dies and he becomes Earl of Chelsea, with estates and fortune enough for a prince. I know not how men dare thus to trade one with another—how a son dares to make a jest of his father's approaching death, and sign deeds, which, in some sort, depend for their fulfilment upon that father's death. O mother, mother! we live in an evil world! Methinks it were good to die young, before we learned its evil. I would sooner be the vilest scullion wench, and toil from morn till night for my daily bread, than be dressed in yon gauds, and hear and see the things I am forced to hear below,' and Marcia spurned with her foot the yellow robe, and shook back her haughty head with a fine gesture of scorn.

Martha Brayling was weeping copiously, as she always did when any kind of trouble or

Hosted by Google

perplexity fell upon her. She knew well that her daughter had just ground of complaint; that young Lord Hartsbourne's almost daily visits were mainly paid with the design of seeing the beautiful girl who had for the moment ensnared his fickle fancy. She knew that by means of Marcia's attractions, Nicholas was getting firmer and firmer hold of the youth whose possessions would one day be so large, and that he was vastly pleased with the success of his last speculation. There had been disputes before now between father and daughter since Marcia had learned the true reason for her presence in the parlour, but hitherto parental authority had triumphed. Now, however, the girl seemed to have reached the limit of her patience. She had the courage which carries passive resistance into open revolt when a certain limit has been reached, and the frightened mother verily believed that this limit had been well-nigh reached now.

She secretly sympathised with her daughter (though, not being possessed of Marcia's finer instincts, she did not fully understand how the girl's pride and modesty were alike outraged by the barefaced admiration of the ruffled gallants);

Hosted by Google

but she dreaded above all things a family quarrel, and all through her life had put up with every kind of domestic tyranny rather than anger her lord and master. And so she would have done much to avert the threatened explosion now, and sought for arguments to soothe her child's outraged feelings.

'If you anger your father, Marcia, how will he answer when you ask for the money he has promised to give? Methought you were to serve him for a reward? Sure, child, you will not endanger that by your headstrong temper? Can you not, for love of your friend, endure a little longer?'

Marcia paused suddenly in her restless walk, and sank down into a chair beside her mother's bed.

'Alack and woe is me! what shall I say and do? I have served my father well. He has said so himself, and he praises not without cause; and yet if I ask the gold he promised, he puts me off, and bids me wait awhile yet. I had looked to receive somewhat of him this very day, but he was angered at my replies to my Lord Hartsbourne, and refused me curtly and harshly.

Hosted by Google

I know well what it will be. If I refuse to do his bidding longer, he will refuse me the promised gold, and I shall not have wherewithal to help my friends. And I have bidden Magdalen to pluck up heart of grace. I have whispered that help is on its way, albeit it may come but slowly. How can I go back from that word now? What must I do? Oh, mother, mother, canst thou not help me? Thou wast young thyself once.'

'Well-a-day, my child, I can scarce remember that day!' sighed the harassed invalid; 'I have suffered so much since then. It is the lot of us poor women; and methinks, child, that thy trial is none so very hard to bear. I would help thee better were I not tied to this bed. I would be at thy side below, and I know things would be better then. But, sure, if thou hast thy father with thee, that is enough. And thou wilt be able to help our good friends and neighbours if thou wilt but strive after a little longer patience.'

Marcia sighed deeply. Her hot anger had had time to cool, though her resolution to endure no more of Lord Hartsbourne's familiarities remained unshaken; but for the moment she was thinking more of Magdalen and the old watch-

Hosted by Google

maker than herself, and her mother thought there was relenting in her next words.

'I must e'en help them—my word is passed. I cannot bear to see how he grows more bent and she more wan day by day. I have earned somewhat. My father cannot refuse me the promised guerdon. I will get it from him and give it them; for I know their need is sore.'

How sore that need was, Marcia would better have understood had she been able to witness some of the scenes that were passing not far away from her abode.

As the evening fell in the narrow alley where lived the poor scrivener and his sister, crippled Hannah had been waiting his return, with a look of deep anxiety upon her patient face. Her brother was out upon the heart-sickening search for employment, and she was awaiting his return, with her hands folded in her lap, for to-day she had no work either, and scarce the strength to do it had it been offered her, and everything depended upon Tom's success in his day's search. The cupboard was almost bare; the last remnants of the treasured dainties from Dick's basket had some days been consumed. The rent had long

Hosted by Google

been overdue, and beggary was staring them in the face. It took all Hannah's patient courage and strong faith to keep her from despairing of help or comfort to come; and the mere sight of her brother's face, as at last he crept wearily in, told her at once that he had nothing but bad tidings.

'No work—no prospect of any,' said the weary scrivener, sinking into a chair which creaked ominously beneath him, and putting his face between his hands. 'Alack, good sister, we are undone indeed; for, coming home, I met Master Peter Frier, and he stopped to ask if we had the rent ready to pay; and hearing how bad times were, he frowned a mighty frown, and as he went off I heard him mutter something about an execution; and I fear me that, ere many days have passed, our few poor goods will be seized and sold, and we ourselves turned out into the street to beg or starve.'

'God in His mercy save us from that!' breathed Hannah, whilst the tears gathered in her eyes and fell slowly down her cheeks. She looked round at the meagre plenishings of the little room with eyes full of love. They were

Hosted by Google

neither costly nor beautiful, but she had known them all her life, and they were like friends to her. It would break her heart, she felt, to see them snatched away and sold to strangers. Everything had a special value of its own from old association. The costly goods had all gone when their fortune had taken to itself wings. They had only retained such things as were of small value, but greatly beloved for the sake of those who had owned and treasured them in bygone days.

Hannah wept for a few moments, but then dried her eyes, whilst she tried to smile and cheer her despondent brother. It had always been her task to uphold and support him in times of darkness and depression; for, though her bodily frame was feeble, her mind was the stronger of the two.

'Brother,' she said, 'let us not too easily despair. Last time, when things seemed at their worst, help came to us when we had ceased to hope it. Did not sweet Mistress Magdalen bring us a golden guinea with her own hands, and a basket to boot, which kept our larder filled for many a long day? It may be that with them

Hosted by Google

things are better; it may be they could help us yet again. Why not go thither to-night and tell Master Michael the sore strait we are in? He has a kind heart. If it is possible, he will help us in our extremity. At least there will be a bite and a sup for you at his table, and, after your long day of weariness and disappointment, that will do you good. A trouble shared with a friend often loses something of its sting. Go, then, to Fleet Street, and talk it over with Master Michael. It may be that young Christopher Mason will be there. He is a man of business; he might give you good advice. It might be, he would even give you employment, since men say he is like to rise and to thrive. Tarry not here, where naught can be done, but see if our friends may not yet have help or comfort to give.'

Tom would almost sooner have stayed where he was, but the hint about Christopher was not without effect. It was quite possible that the merchant might know of one wanting the aid of a scrivener's pen. It could do no harm to step to Michael's house on the chance of meeting him; and, as Hannah had said, there was always

Hosted by Google

the hope that the watchmaker might be able to assist him, though that hope was growing fainter and fainter as time went by, and he seemed to be going so fast down the hill.

Tom knew well that the debt was not one that could be pressed, even if he could have brought himself to use harsh measures towards his old friend. He had not worked in the law-courts for nothing, and, though well aware that Michael fully recognised the obligation, he knew that the claim would be laughed to scorn by the ordinary man of the world; and this made him the more diffident about troubling the watchmaker over much.

When he reached Fleet Street, he turned through the gateway of the Inner Temple, in the vain hope of finding work from one of the lawyers who sometimes employed him. Then he crossed the street to the clockmaker's, which was nearly opposite.

Michael was out when the scrivener arrived, and Dick was at the door on the look-out for customers.

'Halloo there, Master Scrivener!" he cried, as he saw Tom's shabby figure slowly approach-

Hosted by Google

GATEWAY OF THE INNER TEMPLE.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

ing; 'how wags the world with you to-day? Are things brisker with the men of the law than with the men of business, eh?'

'Alack, no!' answered Tom, shaking his head mournfully; 'times with me are terrible bad. I know not what will become of us if help does not come our way ere long. I greatly fear our poor goods will be sold in a few days' time, and then we had better drown ourselves in the river at once, for drowning is easier than starving.'

Dick's round face looked very grave. He scratched his poll and uttered a low whistle. He had thought the life of the city such a mighty pleasant and prosperous thing a few months back, and now he was fain to believe that the country was best after all.

'Look you here, Master Scrivener,' he said, 'I can give you better counsel than that. If you get turned out of your home, go not to the river bed too soon; go rather to Newgate Market, hard by your abode, and ask for one Peter Cold, who for all his name has a warm heart, and ask him to let you have a seat in his cart, which goes back empty of a Saturday,

Hosted by Google

and passes by the very door of my father's farm. There I warrant you will find a welcome and a shelter for a while, if you talk to my mother of me, and tell her I bid you come. Mistress Hannah, for all her lameness, can lend a hand with the picklings and preservings, the bakings and brewings, that go on right merrily at this time, and you can help garner the crops. A man the more is always welcome on the farm in harvest time, though to be sure your hands are better fitted for wielding the pen than the reaping-hook. But so as you say that I, Dick Bolt, sent you, your welcome will be sure, and you can bide there awhile till better days dawn.'

Dick, it must be owned, loved to play the patron, albeit his generous nature, inherited from kindly and hospitable parents, prompted him to kind thoughts and kind actions when they were possible of performance. He would gladly have fed his master's household from the abundance of his father's house had not that privilege been denied him; and he was eager to do anything he could for the poor scrivener, knowing how keenly his young mistress felt for their distress, and that she was actually denying

Hosted by Google

herself needful food to save money to give to them.

Whilst Tom was thanking him warmly, asking if he really meant this, and obtaining rather more precise information as to the locality of Dick's home and the occupations of Peter Cold, the boy was following his own train of thought whilst giving answers to all questions ; and as Tom produced his tablets to make some notes, the boy asked suddenly,—

'Master Scrivener, can you write verses ?'

The poor man blushed to the roots of his hair. He had a feeble little turn in that direction, and although no fame or money had ever come to him through his compositions, he cherished them fondly nevertheless, and to Dick's question he returned a hesitating assent. The boy's eyes lighted, and he took the little man by the arm and led him into a dark corner of the shop, where they were safe from eavesdroppers.

'Look you here, Master Scrivener,' he said in a whisper, 'you have asked me how you may serve me if it be that you find a refuge in your trouble in my father's home. Well, I will soon

Hosted by Google

tell you what you may do. Write me a couple of sonnets or sets of couplets in praise of fair Mistress Magdalen. Let all her charms be roundly set down—albeit in the softest language known to the poet—and let me have these verses to do as I will with; to be as though they were mine own making. How say you?'

Tom looked rather taken aback at hearing of this proposed appropriation, but Dick had cheered him wondrously, and he was loth to refuse. He contented himself then by asking,—

'But wherefore thine own? Why should she think that they are of thy writing?'

'Marry, because I would fain show her thus how deeply I adore her,' answered Dick with glowing face. 'Look you here, Master Scrivener, I am a boy in years, but I have the heart of a man, and I love my mistress. At this moment she thinks naught of me, for there is another that holds the foremost place in her heart; but he is unworthy of her. He is a poltroon, a popinjay, a worthless varlet. He loves her not. He loves only his yellow gold, and the day will dawn when she will

Hosted by Google

assuredly find this out. That is the day for which I wait—that is the day for which I long.'

'Ay, but the verses—the sonnet?' interrupted the poet, who was unable to feel that overwhelming interest in Dick's love story which it merited in the boy's eyes; 'what of them?'

'Why, you must know,' answered Dick, with an air of subdued pride, 'that I have a tuneful voice and a knack of setting to some fitting melody any words that hit my fancy, and could you but provide me with an amorous ditty or two addressed as by a fond swain to his mistress, and describe therein all the many charms of the sweetest lady that ever lived—to wit, Mistress Magdalen—then, in the hour of her grief and desertion, I would stand beneath her window and warble of my love. This would mightily take her fancy. She would look out in the darkness, and see naught but a muffled figure, and would marvel greatly who he was who thus sang her charms, and let her fancy play about him. He would come again and yet again, and each time she would wonder the more, and learn to think of him with the sweet voice and tender

Hosted by Google

songs as a lover not to be lightly sent away. Her fancy thus caught, she would think by night and day of the unknown singer, and at last the day would come when, casting his cloak aside, the faithful lover will stand boldly forth, and she would see—'

'Shutters up, you idle loon!' shouted a rough voice almost at his elbow, and Dick started round in such a hurry that he almost knocked over the little scrivener, whom he had so tightly wedged in the corner. 'The master is coming, and were he any other than he is he would chide you roundly for your lazy ways, chattering like a magpie before the work is done, and strutting about as if the whole world was yours to play the fool in. Fall to, boy, and do your work; and you, Master Scrivener, if you wish to see the master, walk upstairs. Supper is well-nigh served, and he can talk to you then.'

Steve had a way of making himself master in the shop, and Dick sprang to obey him, devoutly hoping that the shopman had not heard any of his confidence to Tom. Steve was not wont to trouble his head over other people's

Hosted by Google

business, and since a long conversation held between him and his master soon after his rude behaviour to the belated customer, he had been working away with more energy than usual. His temper did not appear to have improved, but he was zealous to try and serve customers on the few occasions when they had crossed the threshold.

Dick was rather late in going up to supper, and had had time to feel rather shamefaced about the confidence he had made to the scrivener. He took a boyish pride in his passion for his young mistress, and there were moments when it gave him keen pleasure to talk of it, and to show his manliness by the highflown language which he borrowed from the stage. But these outbursts of grandeur were often followed by a reaction, and the boy had a dim misgiving that he had made a fool of himself in the eyes of his confidant of an hour back.

So he looked rather sheepish as he crept into the parlour, and was relieved to find that his entrance was not even noticed, the company

Hosted by Google

being far too much occupied with affairs in which he held no share.

Magdalen's eyes were full of tears. Her hand was on her father's arm. She seemed to be imploring him to do something or say something, and the old man's face was full of trouble and perplexity.

It was plain that Tom had told his pitiful tale, and had made his timid appeal for help. Poor Michael, who would have given the coat off his own back to one more needy than himself, found himself in the wretched plight of having to refuse a friend not merely a loan in the hour of adversity, but the repayment of money which he never denied to be lawfully due. And yet what could he do? His pockets were empty; there had been no business done that day; there was nothing in the till. His own rent was long over-due, and he had not wherewithal to pay it. Things were only a little less bad with him than with Tom and his sister, and how was he to answer this pitiful appeal.

The scrivener was speaking hesitatingly but urgently.

Hosted by Google

'He is rich,' he said. 'All the world says that he is a rising man—that he will make his fortune ere long. He loves Mistress Magdalen. He is almost like a son to you. Could you not ask somewhat of him? A little—a very little would keep our poor little things together for us.'

'He loves Magdalen, I hope,' answered Michael, speaking slowly and absently; 'yet, I fear me, he loves his gold better.'

'Father, father, say not so!' pleaded Magdalen, leaning over the chair in which the old man sat, and adding her voice to Tom's. 'Surely you will ask him. Methinks he cannot refuse *you*. We must do something for these good friends. We must—we must!'

And yet Magdalen herself could not but recollect what she had heard from Christopher's lips the day when she had told him of their trouble. She had a hope that her father might succeed where she had failed—she fancied that his word would carry more weight than hers, that he would convince the young merchant of the real obligation of the debt. Anything was better than that these poor folk should suffer

Hosted by Google

so. She spoke with unwonted energy and vehemence.

'Father, tell him you ask it for your sake—for my sake—how can he refuse then? Tell him, if you will, how this trouble weighs upon me—how it crushes me to the very dust. Sure, if he loves me, he cannot say you nay. Father, tell him you ask it in my name. I trow that must win him, let him love his gold ever so well.'

Dick could stand no more. He fled away with swelling heart and burning eyes, and as he tumbled himself into his box-like bed, he cried in tones of smothered fierceness,—

'He will win her with his accursed gold! She will sell herself to him sooner than disappoint these simple folk who trust them. And she will never, never know how true a heart she has lost!'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER IX

STORMY SCENES

'WHO'LL buy? Who'll buy? Best clocks and watches in all London town! Clocks that never go wrong! Clocks alway right! Come and see! There's the church to check them by; and who ever heard of St Dunstan's being wrong. Watches, the best in the city! Come and see! Come and buy! Buy! buy! buy! You'll never repent it if you do. Master Michael's own watches — the best in the town. Buy! buy! buy!'

So sang Dick as he stood in the doorway this hot afternoon, lustily mingling his voice with that of others, boys and men, who were equally desirous of attracting customers to their respective shops. It was the busiest time of day for wealthy passers-by. Fashionable ladies were rolling by in coaches, and young gallants, in fine garments, walked arm in arm along

Hosted by Google

the narrow pavement, or stood about the Bar watching the fair damsels go by. The hot sunshine showed all the bright colours to great advantage, and the whole scene was gay and varied. The month of August was on the wane, and the predictions of another visit from the dreaded scourge of the plague had not been verified. People were beginning to take courage, and to laugh at their fears, and the wiseacres who had predicted some great calamity were striving to explain away the prophecies which did not appear likely to be verified.

Some bolder or more gloomy spirits still insisted that there was coming woe to be read in the stars, and by other occult means, but few believed these dismal auguries. To-day all was brightness and cheerfulness, all the world seemed to be abroad. Dick was delighted by the lively aspect of the street, and indeed, poor boy, he needed something to cheer him, for affairs indoors were certainly bad.

Trade with Michael Widdrington seemed utterly stagnant. Whether or not the offended customer of a short time back had really set on foot any injurious report concerning him

Hosted by Google

could only be a matter of conjecture, but certainly trade had seemed to leave his premises from that night. Nothing whatever had been done in the way of business since then. He went about with a bent and bowed look. Magdalen's cheek was wan, and her eyes were heavy with anxiety and fear. Steve was even rougher and gruffer than his wont, as though he felt himself to blame for his past conduct, yet only grew more ill-tempered at the thought. It was altogether a deplorable state of things; and Dick, as he saw the growing despondency of his young mistress's looks, set his teeth hard, and vowed to do something for her, be the cost what it might.

The only way open, at this moment, was to cry his wares as lustily as possible, and strive to tempt in some idle passer-by out of curiosity, if for no other motive.

Dick did not lack for assurance, and his voice was a piercing one that easily made itself heard above others. He varied his ordinary calls by improvising long speeches in praise of his master's goods, and telling such wonderful stories about them, invented on the spur of the moment, that

Hosted by Google

Magdalen, seated in the balcony above, could not help laughing softly to herself despite her anxiety and sorrow.

Dick's honest face, bright eyes and important address, made many passers-by pause a moment to listen to him; but the dark shop of the watchmaker, with its meagre show of wares, did not invite farther survey, and the disappointed lad saw person after person go by, whose faces led him to hope something better from their passing interest.

At length a middle-aged gentleman in a green doublet and breeches, a big flowing wig, with a pleasant face and indolent manner, came sauntering leisurely along, carrying a gold-headed walking stick, and looking about him with the air of a man in a pleasant temper with himself and all the world. Dick saw him coming, and surpassed himself in efforts to attract his attention. He had observed before now that watches and clocks attracted more elderly men than young ones, and this stranger seemed just in the humour to be caught by the passing fancy of the moment.

On he came, and Dick piped up, his fresh

Hosted by Google

young voice sounding pleasantly enough in the surrounding din. The gentleman possibly had a musical ear, or was taken by the lad's bright face, for he paused and listened to him awhile, and then rapped him on the shoulder with the end of his elegant cane.

'And pray, Mr 'Prentice, how much of all that fine tale do you believe yourself? And how much do you look to make other honest folk believe—eh, boy?'

'Indeed, sir,' cried Dick eagerly, 'it is nought but the truth that my master sells the best watches and clocks in Fleet Street—nay, in all the city too. I would you could hear what they say who buy them! You don't find our customers going elsewhere. But come in, I pray you, my lord, come in and see for yourself. Why, it is a beautiful sight to see our clocks, all marking the time of day, and not one a second too backward or forward. Pray come in—I would fain show you what we have.'

'But I do not want either watches or clocks, my good lad. I was but listening to your marvellous tales.'

'Oh, but come in—do but come in, my lord;

Hosted by Google

and I promise you you shall not rue it. I will show you the very watch of which I spoke but a moment back. One step will take you inside. Sure that will not take you far out of your way,' and whilst the gentleman, still smiling, but willing to be thus far amused let himself be led into the dark little shop, Dick bustled past him and set a chair, and bawled out to Steve, who was below routing amongst the old cases for some papers his master had sent for, —'Steve! There is a gentleman here who would fain see that watch that was made for His Grace the Duke. Pray you, ask the key of the clamped oaken press from the master, and bring it hither to show him;' then, turning to the customer he added in a polite aside: 'Our goods are too valuable to be all displayed in the shop. We keep the choicest locked away, only to be seen by real lords and great folk, who know where to come when they wish the very best wares.'

Dick was on tenter hooks to see Steve enter into the spirit of the little farce he was playing. He could not believe that anyone could be so dense as not to understand and respond in some ready fashion. They had been planning many

Hosted by Google

days what could be done to help the master, and now :

'What in the name of all the fools in the city mean you by your prating?' roared Steve's surly voice from below; 'Who ever saw a Duke inside this place? And you know that every single watch or clock is in the shop.'

'Stop—the best goods, I mean—the *best*,' shouted Dick in a perfect agony of fear at what was coming next. 'Go to the master—or no—come you here, and I will go to him. He has the key. He will give me what I want. I pray you pardon, my lord. Yon honest fellow knows nought of the watch I spoke of, I will get it from my master. I will be back anon!'

And Dick dashed up the stairs to a case in the parlour, where a curious specimen of the watchmaker's art reposed, which might have been made for some great man of former days, but was now more curious than valuable. While he was unfastening the case he heard Steve's gruff and surly voice below talking in the rasping tones that had done so much mischief already to the master's business.

'If he drives my green-coat away I will beat

Hosted by Google

him black and blue!' cried Dick in an agony of apprehension, and down he went as fast as his legs would carry him, only to see the stranger walking out of the shop with a shrug of the shoulders indicative of some displeasure, whilst Steve stood beside the counter with a scowling brow.

'You have driven him away!' cried the boy beside himself. 'What did you say to him?'

'I told him he was a fool for his pains to believe the nonsense you talked. I told him if he wanted Dukes he'd better take himself elsewhere. We didn't deal with no gentry of that colour. I said—'

'You said enough to get you swung from the highest gallows, if you get one-half what you deserve!' cried poor Dick, his clenched fists and crimson face, bespeaking his keen anger and disappointment. 'You surly brute! You ungrateful dog! Have we not the best and kindest master in the world, and do we not know that he is in trouble? And have we not said a hundred times, that we must strive to help him all we can; and when I get a fine gentleman into the shop, a gentleman that could buy a dozen

Hosted by Google

watches and never feel the difference—then you go and drive him away. Oh! oh! oh! I'll never forgive you! I never will! I'll—'

'Ay, do boy, do!' cried Steve suddenly flinging up his hands with a gesture of one in despair. 'Give me my deserts and beat me black and blue, and turn me out to die in the streets like the hound I am. I tell you this temper of mine is a curse, that makes me hateful to myself and to my fellowmen. It is like a demon within me, tearing at me day and night, and giving me not a moment's peace. I wake with it in the morning; I take it home with me to rest. It never leaves me, year in year out. I loathe myself for it, more than you can loathe me. Many are the times when I vow that it were better to fling myself into the midnight river than to live on as I am doing now.'

Dick was so astonished at this sudden outburst that he could only stand gazing stupidly at Steve, wondering if the skies would fall next.

'Thank heaven, boy, that you have not such a temper as mine,' concluded the man with a heavy, long-drawn sigh; 'it has been the curse of my own life, and that of many another too.'

Hosted by Google

'Can't you conquer it?' asked Dick, remembering how his mother had bidden him fight and pray against his own tendency to passionate anger.

'God, in His mercy, grant I may!' cried Steve, with a sudden burst of emotion, very strange to see in him. 'I have tried, but I must try again. Heaven send I may get the victory at last!'

He broke away with this, and dived down into the cellar again, and Dick went back to his station by the door with a grave face and sobered mien. He did not cry his wares any more. He had lost heart, and was engrossed in his own thoughts beside. Presently, he heard himself hailed by a sweet voice from above, and, looking up, saw his young mistress bending over the balcony.

'Is ought amiss, Dick?' she asked. 'Are you troubled?'

'Nay, mistress; it was but a small disappointment. Methought I had got a customer for the master, and, lo, he escaped, and went off without a purchase, but maybe we shall do better anon. The gay folk all seem out

Hosted by Google

and about to-day. Perchance another will come in.'

It cost Dick a little effort not to recount his grudge against Steve for being so foolish and so unmannerly; but after what he had just heard, it seemed unkind to speak against the poor fellow, who seemed to be his own worst enemy, and he contented himself with this very mild version of the story. But, perhaps, Magdalen had heard or guessed more, for she gave him a very kindly smile, called him a right good lad, a trusty, kindly 'prentice boy, and altogether so uplifted Dick with happiness that all the brightness of the day seemed to come back to him.

Magdalen had risen from her seat to speak to Dick, and now stood looking down into the busy street. The cloth cap had fallen from her auburn hair, and it shone like gold in the bright light of the August sunlight. The girl was very simply dressed, but the plain sad-coloured robe, only seemed to set off to the more advantage the slim figure and gentle spiritual face. It was just such a face as one sees in the painted windows of old churches, and more than one

Hosted by Google

passer-by raised his head to give a momentary glance of pleasure at the fair ethereal-looking girl with her deep blue eyes fixed upon the golden sky. Her thoughts had turned away, after a brief survey, from the shifting throng in the street, and centered in the great clouds sailing by in the blue vault of heaven. To Magdalen, they looked like mighty-winged angels hovering over the vast city; and the fancy pleased her, and a smile flickered over her face. In her loneliness and fear of coming trouble, the thought of angelic guardians was a sweet and tranquillising one, and the girl was lost in her own dreams when a voice in the street caused her to look down once again.

'Good even, fairest lady!' said the voice, in accents which betrayed that the speaker had been indulging in deep potations, and was just only master of his utterance, 'I could scarcely believe my eyes when I beheld so fair a creature standing thus betwixt earth and heaven. "It is an angel," I said in my heart—why, how now, mistress; whither away so fast. Nay, nay, this must not be, my beauty.' For Magdalen, the moment she found that she was the object of

Hosted by Google

this address, darted into the house, having recognised, as she too well believed, in this gaudily-dressed and half-tipsy roisterer none other than Lord Hartsbourne, whose attentions to Marcia were causing her so much distress and indignation.

Dick, standing in the street, and hearing his mistress thus addressed, set his teeth like a young tiger cub couching for a spring, and was about to launch his substantial person upon the over-bold gallant, when the latter disconcerted his movements, by darting suddenly into the shop.

'Ware, Steve, 'ware!' shouted the boy, his hot blood boiling in his veins, as he guessed at the purpose of the young nobleman, and precipitated himself after him into the shop.

Steve was putting something into the case behind the counter, but, at Dick's cry, he turned quickly round to see the gaily-dressed gentleman making for the door which led upwards into the dwelling-house above.

'Stop him! Steve, stop him!' shouted the boy, in breathless excitement, and the stout fellow pushed the visitor away, and set his back against the door.

Hosted by Google

'Stand aside, varlet, or I run you through!' shouted the young nobleman, as he drew his sword, enraged beyond all bearing at being thus thwarted. 'Out of my way, villain. I will spit you like a woodcock if you dare to oppose me!'

But Steve valiantly kept his post, his dark eyes gleaming under their black brows as fearless as a lion, though the peril was sufficiently real, and he might well have paid the forfeit of his courage with his life, for the shining blade was within an inch of his breast, when Dick caught the young nobleman's arm, and thus drew his fury upon himself.

With a hoarse oath, the half-drunken swordsman struck furiously at the boy, but Dick had seized a shutter-bar that lay ready to his hand, and the blow aimed at his head fell upon the tough iron, and the blade of the shining weapon was shivered into half-a-dozen fragments.

'Villain, you shall pay for this!' yelled the gallant, now well-nigh mad with rage, and he launched himself upon the boy, striking at him with the broken end of his weapon in an access of mad fury, that might have had disastrous

Hosted by Google

results for brave Dick, had help not been at hand.

The noise of the scuffle and of angry voices, together with the clash of arms, had drawn other people to the shop door. The 'prentice boys, always ready for the fray, were the first to become aware of the contention raging within, and at the sight of the familiar flat caps clustering round the doorway, Dick raised a shout that was well known in London streets, and was never heard without receiving a hundred answers.

The lads poured in till the little shop was filled to overflowing, and, for a moment, all that Dick felt was a sensation of crushing and suffocation, that was almost worse than the blows which had gone before. Then came a welcome sense of relief, as the pressure suddenly slackened, and Dick was aware that his adversary was beating a retreat with a broken head, and was making off down the street, the bold 'prentice boys pursuing him with jeers, in no way daunted by his fine clothes, and pelting him with any unsavoury missiles which they picked up from the gutter as they ran.

Hosted by Google

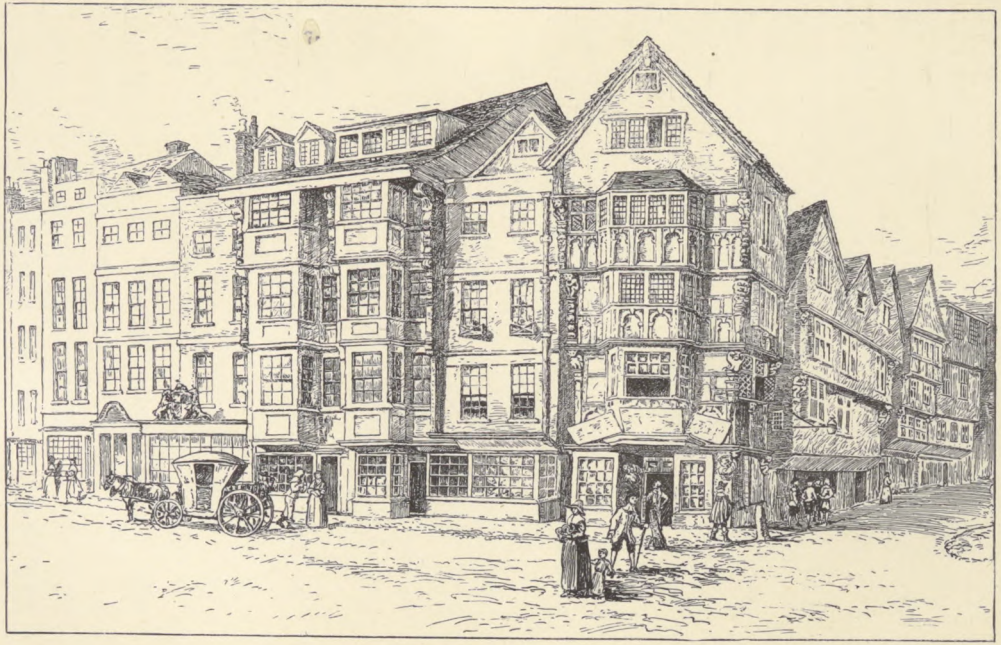
Dick was out in a second, joining in the chase, with a right good will, leading the pursuit with a bleeding face past Chancery Lane, and as far as Temple Bar, where the onslaught of the hooting 'prentices was somewhat checked by the sight of the tall figure of Nicholas Brayling, who, advancing from the opposite direction, came suddenly under the arch.

Now Nicholas was a member of the corporation, and a man of some importance, and the rabble rout scattered at sight of him, the boys scuttling back to their posts, leaving the Viscount, with torn raiment and broken head, to give his own account of the affray.

Nicholas took him back to his own house, and Dick, watching them repass, caught a fierce vindictive scowl upon the young lord's face which he felt boded him little good. His young mistress and her father were now in the shop, asking the meaning of all the commotion; and Dick was taken upstairs by Magdalen to have his bruises and cuts washed, for Lord Hartsbourne's attack had left some traces upon his countenance.

Dick, however, was hugely pleased and

Hosted by Google



THE CORNER OF OLD CHANCERY LANE.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

proud. Had not these scars been won in the defence of his well-beloved mistress? and was it not plain that she knew as much? For she never reproached him for his brawling propensities; but spoke softly and kindly to him all the while, though she was still trembling from the effects of excitement and alarm.

'Think you that he will come back?' she asked, as she finished her gentle ministrations; and Dick, arranging his crop of curls better to conceal the plaster with which his poll was ornamented, answered proudly,—

'And what if he does, Mistress Magdalen? Shall we not be ready for him again? Not a 'prentice lad but would spill his blood for thee. "He is thrice armed that hath his quarrel just."'

Magdalen could not forbear a smile, though her face was still pale and troubled.

'You are a good lad, Dick,' she said. 'You have a kind, loyal heart; but I would not that any in our house suffered through my carelessness or inadvertence. Would that I had not shown myself on the balcony to-day. And yet who could have guessed that harm might follow?'

Hosted by Google

Dick tried to find some fine phrase in which to answer, but Magdalen was not heeding. She had been thoroughly frightened by the event of the afternoon, and when her father came up from hearing Steve's account, she could see that he shared her anxieties.

'If harm befall the lad through this day's hap I shall grieve sorely,' said he. 'How can I write to his mother that he has been sent to jail? It will go nigh to break her heart. And yet my Lord Hartsbourne is not like to let such an affront pass unpunished; and of all the 'prentice lads who set upon him he will only know the name and abode of Dick.'

'Think not of me, good master!' cried the boy, suddenly appearing out of his closet-like bed-chamber. I would die a thousand deaths for the sake of Mistress Magdalen. What will a few weeks of Newgate or Bridewell matter?'

But Michael only shook his head.

'It is easy to talk, my lad,' said he abstractedly. 'But I fear me you will find a taste of prison discipline little to your liking. And to think it should come upon you in my house! Alack-a-day! Troubles never come alone.

Hosted by Google

Heaven help us through this dark day, for I see nothing but clouds and perplexities about us!'

'Take no thought for me, I beseech you, good Master Michael,' said Dick with cheerful confidence. 'My back is broad enough to bear mine own burden.'

'You are a good lad,' said both his master and mistress in a breath, and Dick liked to hear the word of praise; but he felt that his willingness to suffer in their service did not greatly lighten their anxieties, and he always had a vague idea that the true nature of his devotion to his mistress was scarcely understood or appreciated.

Nor were Magdalen's anxieties allayed when she went upstairs, for Marcia was awaiting her on the balcony, and told her that Lord Hartsbourne was fearfully incensed at the ignominious treatment he had met with that day in the shop of the watchmaker, and he had been raving in his drunken fashion for above an hour in her father's parlour, and had vowed vengeance upon every person who had had a hand in the affair.

'But what could he do to hurt us?' asked

Hosted by Google

Magdalen, trembling in every limb. 'We have done no wrong. It was he who strove to force his way into the house.'

'Ay, but he sees no offence in that, and he will have the law of Dick, and perhaps of others, for assault and brawling, and I know not what. He vows he will not rest till he has brought the lad to the gallows and your father to beggary. Half his talk may be idle braggart words, such as those of his sort love to use; but he has a villainous temper, and a name that gives him power with all the great folk. I fear me it may go hardly with poor Dick. I would it had never happened.'

'So verily do I,' answered Magdalen, wringing her hands. 'Alack, what will they do with him? I am sorely grieved for the lad.'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER X

A DAY OF TROUBLE

THE month of August, with its glaring sun and parching wind, passed away, and the sun rose on the first day of September 1666. The sky was still cloudless, and the east wind still blew strongly.

Michael rose earlier than usual and was sitting at his work with a heavy heart, when there came a knock at the door of his little room, and the scrivener entered.

'Good Master Michael, it has come at last,' he said. 'They have put an execution into my house. By Monday, if the money be not forthcoming for the rent, all that we have will be sold, and we ourselves turned adrift into the world, helpless and homeless.'

Michael raised his face from his work to meet the troubled gaze of the poor scrivener,

Hosted by Google

who, more pale and wan than even his wont, stood just within the doorway, and for a moment the two stood gazing at each other with a glance of mute dismay.

'Monday; and to-day is Saturday!' Michael passed his hand across his brow, and his troubled gaze bespoke his perplexity of soul. Poor Tom saw in that gaze nothing to inspire hope, and a deep sigh, almost like a groan, burst from him.

'On Wednesday I have the promise of work, and work that will be better paid than any I have lately done,' he said; 'but although I went last night to see my hard-hearted landlord and tell him all, and promise payment if he could but have patience, he drove me from his doors with oaths, and said he had heard something too much of such promises in his time to be fooled by them longer. And if the rent be not forthcoming on Monday, all will go, and my poor sister's heart is like to break at the thought. Oh, Master Michael, can you not help us? I could repay you in no long time.'

'Would that I could,' said Michael; 'but I know not how. Money I have none. My own

Hosted by Google

rent is long overdue. Perchance I shall soon be in like case myself.'

Tom's eyes were wandering about the little den where several watches and clocks, in different stages of completeness, were lying about. In the shop beyond, the stock-in-trade was arranged in cases along the wall, and as he looked about him, a sudden hope seemed to enter his head.

'Good neighbour,' he said eagerly, 'let me have but a few of these goods of yours to raise money upon, and the trouble will be ended. I can soon make shift to bring them back to you when once my work begins. It is but for a few days they will be missing from your shop; and trade is very slack with you, it is scarce like that you would sell them these next days. I pray you let me have them. I will redeem them and restore them ere long.'

Tom was fairly trembling with this new hope, and doubted not to receive a ready assent. But Michael's face grew more and more perplexed and grieved, and he shook his head slowly and mournfully.

'Alack, good Tom, it may not be

Hosted by Google

'May not be? Why not, Master Michael?'

'Because my word is pledged.'

'To whom—to what?'

Poor Tom was shivering all over. The long strain of want and anxiety was telling upon him, and he was easily moved to keen emotion.

'To my landlord, Master Nicholas Brayling. I have passed my word to him not to dispose of any part of my stock, save in the ordinary way of business. He had a right to demand this of me. He did so when the day for the payment of the rent passed by, and I could only go and tell him that I had not the money. He did not press me. Hard man though he is to many, he has not been hard towards me. He said we must wait for better times, and forbore even those reproaches at my ill success in business which others too often level at me. But he did exact a promise from me that my stock-in-trade should not be removed or money raised upon it. He had the right to demand as much, and I passed my word to him. I may not break my word even for your sake, Tom. It goes to my heart to refuse you; but what else can I do?'

Hosted by Google

The poor scrivener sank down upon an empty chest, and buried his face in his hands. He had not the courage of his sister, and it seemed that if help came not in time he must sink under his load of poverty and misery. Michael looked at him with compassionate eyes, but knew not how to comfort him. His own affairs were dark enough; but the bitterest sting of his poverty was his inability to come to the aid of a friend who had some right to look to him for assistance.

At last Tom looked up once again with lack-lustre eyes. He made yet another suggestion, but without the eagerness of a few minutes back.

'Master Nicholas Brayling is a wealthy man. He is a friend of yours likewise. Perchance, were you to ask him, he would lend the money to you. I can repay it soon; in very truth, I can.'

'I fear me Nicholas would not part with his gold. It is dearer to him than aught else in the world. I know that well, for there have been moments in days gone by when a small loan would have helped me to a successful stroke of business; but my neighbour could

Hosted by Google

never be persuaded to grant me the needful gold; nay, not at usury. He ever says that borrowing is no game for poor men to mingle in—that he only lends to the rich, or to those who will one day be rich. He knows well that I am in a sore strait myself. I might better ask gold of the stones in the street than of him.'

Again Tom's head dropped between his hands, and for some time he sat in the silence of utter despondency, Michael watching him with a look of deepening perplexity on his face.

'I will do something for you if I can, Tom,' he said at last, his kind heart wrung by the sight of so much sorrow and suffering. 'I may not promise ought, but I will strive amain to get the money before Monday. Do not give way. There be many who have been saved, even at the eleventh hour. I will do what I can. There is still one hope left.'

Tom raised his head and looked eagerly at Michael.

'Master Christopher Mason—speak you of him?' he asked. 'Mistress Magdalen said that he might help. Have you spoken to him?'

'I have not seen him since the day you came

Hosted by Google

hither before. He is a man of business, and his time is precious. But I will make shift to see him to-day or to-morrow; and I will do all I can to get timely aid to save your goods. Take heart, good Tom. Perchance there be brighter days in store for all.'

The bright days looked far enough off, Tom thought, as he went slowly away towards his own home, a little cheered by Michael's promise, but afraid to let himself hope too much.

As for the watchmaker, he settled again to his work with a weary sigh. It was useless attempting to see Christopher at this time of day. He must wait till the evening. Most likely he would drop in at supper time. He generally did so on a Saturday evening, and if not, Michael would see him at his own lodgings. Something must, if possible, be done for poor Tom, and the old man did not know of the appeal his daughter had made before on behalf of the hapless scrivener, nor the fashion in which it had been received.

The first day of September brought to the watchmaker's mind the thought of Michaelmas and rent day, and the gradual approach of

Hosted by Google

winter. If trade had been bad in summer it was scarce likely to improve in the winter months. Michael's heart was heavy within him when he thought of these things, and Magdalen's face was grave as she went about her accustomed household tasks. Even in the shop something of the same gloom prevailed. Dick had scarce the spirit to cry his wares; and sat upon the counter listening, with a sense of grim fascination, to Steve's stories of the death of the regicides, hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn, which ghastly scene the shopman had witnessed in all its revolting details, and which Dick, who had a boy's taste for horrors was fond of making him describe.

As the two were engrossed in this enlivening theme, the door was suddenly darkened by a burly form, and a rough voice asked,—

'Where is the 'prentice lad, one Richard Bolt, who is bound to Master Michael Widdrington?'

Dick's heart was in his mouth, for the person who asked this question was plainly a constable; and in his hand he carried a paper which had a formidable aspect in Dick's eyes. But he was

Hosted by Google

not going to let his fears be seen, and he stood boldly forward.

'I am he,' said the boy without hesitation. 'What want you with me, Master Constable?'

'To give you this paper, boy.'

'And what may that paper be?' asked Dick, whose scholarship was very meagre, taking the document and eyeing it much as if it had been some explosive that might burst in his hand.

'Marry, no more nor no less than a summons to appear before his worship the Lord Mayor on Monday next to come; to answer to him for certain misdemeanours as described within.'

'Misdemeanours! the Lord Mayor! a summons!' gasped Dick; visions of Tyburn, the gallows and the executioner's knife rising in a confused and horrid medley before his mind's eye. He had the vaguest notion of legal penalties, and was seized with a fear lest he should have to pay for his boldness with his life.

'Ay, boy, misdemeanours, provoking a riot here in Fleet Street, and assaulting my Lord Hartsbourne, and causing him bodily injury. You will have to answer for your conduct before the Lord Mayor, and a taste of the whip-

Hosted by Google

ping post and prison fare will teach you a lesson you will do well not to forget. I wish his lordship would order every 'prentice lad in London a sound whipping. They give more trouble to orderly folk than all the rest of the town put together,' and the constable delivered his paper and went his way, leaving Dick staring at it with wide-open eyes, and Steve looking over his shoulder in great curiosity and interest.

'What will they do to me, Steve?' faltered Dick, his manliness ebbing somewhat at the thought of the pains and penalties of the law.

Steve shook his head gloomily. He was thankful that his name was not on the warrant too.

'Nay, I know not. Put you in the pillory, perchance, or set you in the stocks, or whip you from Newgate to Tyburn. They are mighty fond of whipping 'prentice boys. They think it does them good, and sets an example to the rest. Lord Hartsbourne was in a mighty taking, by all one hears; and he is a fine young gallant, and has fine friends in high places. He'll do his best to get it well laid on. You'll

Hosted by Google

have but little skin left on your back, Dick, if he gets his way.'

Dick shivered in every limb, and his flesh crept on his bones. He was a bold lad for a fray or a fight, and could take as well as give hard blows with right good will and no fear. But to have his back scored and flayed by the hangman's whip, and to suffer the disgrace as well as the pain of such a punishment might well make his heart quail. Steve's stories of such punishments had been painted in the most gory colours, and his blood ran cold at the thought.

'Don't prisoners die sometimes when they are whipped like that through the streets?' he asked.

'Ay, some of them do; or when they get back to prison. I remember one such fellow—a miserable sight he was—' and Steve went off upon a new story, whilst Dick listened in shivering horror, wondering if he should share a like fate with the hero of the gruesome tale, and if his young mistress would drop a tear for him when she heard of his untimely fate. The first ray of comfort stole into the boy's heart

Hosted by Google

with that thought. He pulled himself together and laid his hand on Steve's arm.

'Good friend,' he said, lapsing suddenly into the grander language which he seldom used in the shop. 'If it should be my fate to perish through the spite and jealousy of yon proud lord, I pray you, when you bear the tidings of my death to Mistress Magdalen, tell her that even death was sweet in the thought that I died for her.'

Steve could not forbear a grin, though he turned away that Dick might not see, for he had a liking for the lad, and would not willingly have hurt his feelings at that moment. Seeing, however, that he was taking matters too seriously, he endeavoured to cheer him up by telling him that his punishment was not likely to result in anything so tragic as death. A few days or weeks on bread and water, and a whipping thrown in if the Lord Mayor chanced to be in a grim humour, or Lord Hartsbourne took the trouble to be there, was the worst that was likely to befall him; and, with good luck, he might get off with something less.

Dick, though not a little relieved at this, was

Hosted by Google

scarcely content to have the matter thus made light of, and, with the mysterious paper still in his hand, he went slowly up the stairs to acquaint his young mistress with what had happened.

Magdalen was greatly troubled. She had a liking for Dick, and she looked upon her own carelessness as the cause of the unfortunate incident. She knew that the riot (if such it could be called) had been provoked in her defence, and was quite as well aware as Dick could wish that he was in trouble on her account. She did not think the penalty would be very severe, as he was so young, and no serious harm had happened to anybody from the scuffle in the street. But for the drunken anger of Lord Hartsbourne, and his annoyance at being thwarted by a mere 'prentice boy and shopman, no notice would have been taken of the matter. Still, it vexed her sorely that Dick should be in disgrace. It seemed to add to the burden of their trials, and to make the dark day darker.

Dick was somewhat consoled by the sympathy and gentle words of his young mistress; and tried to make some protestations of undying

Hosted by Google

devotion, which evoked a faint smile from the girl; then he went down to his station at the shop door, to think over his prospects, and try to compose a suitable message to his mistress in case he should receive a harder sentence than she looked for.

A bright idea struck him as he thus stood pondering. As soon as he was free from his duties, he would take his summons to the house of the scrivener, and consult him about it. Tom had been so much in and about the law offices that, in the eyes of the boy, he almost ranked as a lawyer himself. He would doubtless be able to tell him what punishment was likely to be inflicted on him; and it was just possible that he might have composed some verse or sonnet to Mistress Magdalen which Dick could purchase from him, and leave as a parting offering to his young mistress before going to meet his fate on Monday.

Both these ideas were welcome, and Dick eagerly awaited the hour at which he could call himself free. He stepped across the street to look at the clock face and at the bronze men, and he fell to pondering what life would

Hosted by Google

be like in Bridewell, out of the sound of those familiar bells. He stood still in his favourite place whilst two successive quarters rang out, and then was only awakened from his reverie by the sound of a jeering voice.

'So, so, Master 'Prentice! Make the best of your holiday to-morrow, for it is like to be the last you will enjoy this many a day.'

Dick turned suddenly round at the words, to find himself confronted by young Lord Hartsbourne, who was riding along the street in gorgeous attire, his plumed hat drawn well over his brows to conceal the mark left by the encounter of a few days back, and had reined in his horse at sight of the apprentice, who carried his own scars won in the same fight.

Dick's face went scarlet with anger, and it took all his self-control to keep him from hurling a stone at the young lord, and getting himself into worse trouble. As it was, he contented himself with a gesture and grimace indicative of scorn and defiance, and bawled after the young Viscount sundry taunts and gibes, which were so true and so galling that the rider turned in his stirrups to shake his fist at him.

Hosted by Google

'You will sing to a different tune, you impudent varlet, when the whip is singing in your ears, and the blood is running down your back. I will bid the fellow lay it on well. You shall pay dear for your insolence!'

Magdalen, at the open window, heard every word, and her heart sank within her. Punishments that seem savage to us were a matter of every day occurrence then, but the tender-hearted girl could not endure to think that Dick should have got into such trouble through her inadvertence and mischance. But she drew back into the shelter of the room as the Viscount passed by, and only heard by the tone of his voice that he had reined up at the next house.

'I am coming to you anon, Master Nicholas,' she heard him say in a very different tone from that in which he had addressed Dick. 'I shall be here at dusk, and you will have ready for me what you promised. And I hope fair Mistress Marcia will give me the favour of a few words with her.'

'Ay, verily, she shall,' answered the master of the house in bland accents. 'And if I make

Hosted by Google

thus bold to inquire, how goes it with the health of your noble father? I have heard that—'

'That he is fast dying,' interrupted the Viscount, with a careless laugh. 'And the sooner he is laid under ground the better you will be pleased, eh, Master Moneylender? Well, I do not know that I shall quarrel with the fate that brings him release from his ailments and complainings. They tell me daily that he is like to die ere long, but time goes on, and I see him no nearer dying than before. Still, the happy day may dawn at last, Master Brayling.'

Magdalen shivered to hear a son thus speak of a dying father. Old Lord Chelsea might not have been a man to inspire affection or respect in the heart of his son, but to hear him thus making a jest of his end with a moneylender was a shocking and terrible thing. Nor was the laugh with which Nicholas received the remark more to her liking. She drew away in aversion and disgust, and began to ponder how the news of poor Dick's trouble was to be sent to his mother, if, indeed, the day but one following should see him lodged in gaol.

Her heart was full, indeed, of anxiety and

Hosted by Google

perplexity. Even the bronze men of St. Dunstan's clock seemed to share in her depression, and to strike their bells with mournful cadence. Both the girls accompanied the watchmaker to the clock tower that afternoon to see him wind the ponderous machinery, and sat hand in hand, but their sadness was too deep for many words.

Marcia's face was full of purpose, grave, intent, and resolute. She appeared lost in her own thoughts, and had little to say to Magdalen, though fully sympathising in her grief and anxiety about Dick. Her lips closed firmly, one over the other, as she heard of poor Tom Davis's new trouble. It seemed as if she could scarcely repress the words that rose to her lips. But she did repress them, and as she had never let Magdalen into the secret of her attempted assistance, no question was asked by the younger girl. Once or twice had Magdalen wondered whether she would ever find any fine needlework to do, whereby they two might earn something towards the debt; but Marcia had not named the matter again, and Magdalen's own time was fully occupied in cleaning and cooking, and the care of her father. Marcia had a sick

Hosted by Google

mother to tend ; and, with both of them, it was easier to speak of work than to find it, or the time for doing it.

An old crone was sitting at the door as they came out, talking and gesticulating to a little knot of people gathered round her. Michael walked past unheeding, but the girls lingered a few seconds to hear her strange words, which all told of some near and almost present peril, and Marcia said as they turned away,—

'It is the old mad woman they shut up last week for her wild words. I suppose she is free again now. She goes about telling folk that deadly peril is at hand, and those who like not to be scared by her words complain of her, and bid them send her to prison. There was a time, a few weeks back, when I shivered to hear her talk, but I care little now what she says. It seems as though no peril mattered now. Any change might prove a boon to some. Things cannot well be worse for some in this city than they are now.'

And then Marcia moved away and entered her own door, Magdalen looking after her, and wondering what ailed her that she spoke so

Hosted by Google

strangely. There was trouble enough in all the world around she thought, but Marcia generally seemed full of hope and courage.

Marcia went straight to her father, and stood before him, upright as a dart, queenly and proud. Her head was thrown back, her eyes were very full of determination.

'Father, I desire that promised gold,' she said; 'the month for which I served for it is ended. It is to-day the first of September. Give it me, I pray you, now. I have need of it at once.'

Her father looked her up and down, with a smile in his eyes that was not altogether good to see.

'You shall have it to-night,' he answered, 'when you have done all I desire. Lord Hartsbourne will be here anon. He will sup with me, and you will wait upon us as you have done before. When he has gone you shall have your golden guineas, and not till then.'

'I ask them now. I have earned them. They are mine. Give them me.'

'Good heavens! what is the world coming to, when a daughter turns and orders her father as

Hosted by Google

though he were her slave? For shame, wench! Go! I will have no more of your saucy ways. Do my bidding to-night, and the money shall be yours. That is all I have to say. Now, go!'

Marcia turned and went without a word; but her father would scarce have cared to see the fire in her eyes, nor to know what manner of woman his daughter was growing to be.

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTOPHER'S CONDITION

MAGDALEN awaited with a beating heart the arrival of her lover that evening. She believed that he would come, as he was a man of regular habits, and was generally found at their supper table on a Saturday evening. She knew that her father intended to appeal to him for money to stave off ruin from the poor scrivener's home, and she wondered if it was her duty to tell him of the appeal which she had herself made some weeks ago, and of the answer which she had received from her lover.

The girl had never yet spoken of this matter to her father. The recollection was fraught with too much pain for her to recall it willingly. Christopher's advice to them to repudiate the debt had seemed to her a very terrible thing. She had tried to forget his words, for she loved him

Hosted by Google

still with that faithful woman's love which strives to be blind to faults and failings; and knowing something of business and the ways of the world, she was aware that Christopher's view of the matter, imperfect as it appeared to her, would have been accepted as sound and honourable by most of the persons who traded in the busy city in which she lived. She was thus able partially to absolve her lover, and he had shown himself kind in many little ways that had brought great comfort to her. She was desirous of thinking the best of him, and was loyal to him in her own thoughts, yet she was always a little fearful lest he should suddenly show himself in ungenerous or unfavourable colours. She had a misgiving that this thing was possible, and the misgiving was uppermost this evening when she knew her father intended making his appeal to Christopher's generosity.

She could not make any preparations for a better supper that evening. She had already robbed the larder in order to send round to Hannah, by Dick, a little basket with the best of what it contained, to help them to tide over the Sunday. She cared little for food herself at this

Hosted by Google

time, trouble and anxiety having robbed her of her natural appetite, whilst her father seldom made more than a sparrow's meal. Dick had asked leave of absence that evening, and just now poor Dick was permitted any privilege he craved; so Christopher must needs be content with very frugal fare that night, and make up for it at his own lodging later.

When the young merchant came, he appeared in good spirits. He had about him an air of prosperous contentment that could not but strike those who came across him; and he talked in cheerful fashion about his various enterprises, without appearing to regard the poverty of the table or the wan looks of Magdalen and her father. Some ships had just come into the river, he told them, with cargoes in which he had an interest. All his ventures had turned out well. His one small warehouse was packed full of merchandise, which he looked to sell at great profit in the course of the next few weeks. When that should have been successfully accomplished, he should have realised a sum which would enable him to embark upon enterprises on a still more ambitious scale. It was very

Hosted by Google

plain that he considered himself on the high road to fortune.

This complacent talk was listened to by father and daughter with interest and attention. Michael had once or twice made a movement as if to put a question or offer a remark, but Christopher had kept the conversation in his own hands, and it was some time before anybody else could get in a word. When, however, he appeared to have got through his budget of news, and asked Michael a casual question as to how matters had been going with him, the old man laid his thin white hand upon the table, gently drumming with his fingers upon it as he spoke, and fixed his eyes upon Christopher's face with a keenness of scrutiny that the young man had hardly expected to meet.

'Christopher,' began the watchmaker, speaking in tones of gentle dignity and affection, 'it rejoices me to hear of your good hap. You strive well and diligently for success, and strict attention to business and promptness in all that is undertaken leads, and leads deservedly, to fortune and affluence. But if you will hear the counsel of one who has grown old, and has seen

Hosted by Google

more of life than you have yet done, be careful that, as you grow in wealth, you grow not also in greed. Beware of the love of money—of the sin of covetousness—of that haste to be rich which leads so many, alas! to craft and hardness of heart, and that cruel oppression of their neighbours which may not be sin in the eyes of the law, but which is assuredly a great and terrible offence in the eyes of the Lord. Christopher, I counsel you to fight against that evil tendency, which has been the root of so much of the misery and sin of the world. Love not wealth for its own sake. Be content to work for modest gains, and strive to use the wealth that heaven sends you as may be pleasing in the eyes of God.'

A faint smile curved Christopher's lips as he heard these words. His reply, if a little off-hand, was pleasantly spoken.

'You speak words worthy of a learned divine, Master Michael, and I have no desire to contravert you. Doubtless all you say is sound doctrine. But for me, I am scarce likely to be aught but a striving, struggling man for many a year to come. When the wealth comes, if such good hap befall

Hosted by Google

me, I will e'en come to you for counsel how to spend it rightly.'

Michael shook his head gently, in token that Christopher had scarce understood the drift of his words; but he did not pursue the theme further. There was silence in the room a little while, Magdalen sitting with clasped hands, and looking from one to the other in breathless interest, and then Michael spoke again.

'Christopher,' he said, 'I have been glad to hear that you have been fortunate of late, for I have somewhat to ask of you. It is no easy matter to ask favours even of one who will soon be almost as a son to me, and I would not ask aught for myself alone. You have been ofttimes in my house. It cannot have escaped you that our poverty is great. Nay, you yourself have spoken of it, and have in part pointed out some, at least, amongst the causes which have made and keep us poor. Yet, though we have talked of this, I have never asked your help. I know that you have enterprises of your own on foot, that all young men launching forth upon the troubled sea of business have as much as they can do to keep their heads above the waves and

Hosted by Google

battle successfully through the breakers. I know all that, and I have held my peace all through these long weeks, for I should have been loth to let the shadow of our troubles fall upon you. But to-night I have somewhat to say to you. To-night I hear with pleasure the successful issue of many of your enterprises, and this emboldens me to speak the more freely, though it is not entirely for myself that I thus speak.'

Christopher's face had changed very slightly in expression as he became aware of the drift of Michael's words. His eyes seemed to narrow very slightly, and fixed themselves full on the old man's face. The smile of amusement, slightly tinged with self-complacency, faded quite away, and he looked all at once the alert and watchful man of business.

'I will not weary you with a long story,' continued Michael, speaking in his customary gentle fashion; 'I will content myself with asking you for the loan of five-and-twenty pounds, to be repaid by me in instalments as I shall be able to scrape the money together. I would not have asked you this thus suddenly had I been able to do otherwise, but I myself have been something

Hosted by Google

taken by surprise. In brief, the tale is this. There be some poor friends of ours to whom we owe money. This debt has long hung heavy on my heart, but I have ever lacked the means to discharge it. When I was in sore trouble many years gone by, I was helped and saved from ruin by them. Now, when ruin and bitter poverty stare them in the face, they look to me to save them, and I have no power to do so. But you, Christopher, have gold, and I think that you have also a kindly heart. You are Magdalen's affianced husband, and she will join her voice to mine to plead for this boon. Let us but have this money on the morrow, and I know you will never regret it. For blessed is he that considereth the poor and needy. The Lord will deliver him in the time of trouble.'

Christopher had not interrupted the old man by so much as a gesture. He sat with his eyes on the ground, and seemed to be thinking deeply. His face was not one to be easily read. Magdalen, who was watching him closely, her heart beating in apprehension of some impatient repetition of the arguments he had used when she made her appeal, had no idea what was passing

Hosted by Google

in his mind. She was divided between the fear of angering him and of his showing himself in some unlovely aspect before her father, and her heart beat almost to suffocation as she listened for his reply.

'Five-and-twenty pounds is a large sum for a man like myself to produce at a moment's notice, except in the ordinary way of business,' said Christopher, slowly and thoughtfully. 'And you speak as though it was wanted at once.'

'Ay, so it is—to-morrow, or, at the very latest, on Monday morning early; else will all our good friends' goods and chattels be sold, and they turned as beggars into the streets.'

'And they look to you to find this money?'

'They have little hope of it, but it is their last hope; and, for mine own part, I feel that I would sooner lay me down and die than that such ill-hap should befall them.'

'And what security is there that any repayment would follow? You ask a loan. Do you ask it in your own name, or in that of these poor folk?'

Michael shook his head doubtfully.

'I scarce know how to answer that question.

Hosted by Google

I know that both of us would strive our utmost to repay you. This man, Tom Davis, the scrivener, has promise of work soon, and could do something towards discharging the debt; and I myself will strive to follow your good counsels, and manage my business in better fashion than heretofore. Betwixt us twain somewhat may surely be done. Good Christopher, I see a smile upon your face. Is that a favourable omen or no?'

Michael scarce knew, nor his daughter either, how to interpret that smile. Was it one of derision for the old man's business capacities; or did it preface some gracious offer on the part of the young merchant? Five-and-twenty pounds was a much larger sum of money in those days than it sounds to us now—equivalent, perhaps, to a hundred and fifty in these days.

They waited breathlessly for him to speak.

'Master Michael,' said Christopher, in his terse and business-like fashion, 'You have been plain with me, and I will be plain with you. The sum you ask would be a small thing to some men, but for me it is a large one. Still, I deny not that I could produce the needful amount and

Hosted by Google

bring it you on Monday, if you can agree that is a wise and right thing for me thus to hamper and cripple myself. But I should desire to feel some security, before proceeding farther, as to the chance of repayment in the future. A debt is a debt—a gift is a gift. You ask for a loan. That being so, it is but a right and proper question to ask upon what kind of security it is to be lent.'

Michael bent his head in assent.

'You speak the truth. I ask no gift, only a loan, and I will make it the business of my life to repay it. You have said to me more than once that I have a reputation in the city which I am throwing away by my own fault; that my business might be made tenfold more profitable by the exercise of certain methods I have not hitherto employed in my trade. If I become your debtor, you shall instruct me in these methods, and I will become your pupil. If you are a true prophet, sure it will not be long before the debt is paid, and the old shop in Fleet Street will be known as it was in the days of my father.'

A sudden light flashed into Christopher's eyes.

Hosted by Google

He put out his hand and took that of Michael Widdrington, shaking it warmly.

'Agreed!' he cried, eagerly. 'There is naught would better please me than to set in order your decaying business, and put new life into the dry bones. On Monday morning I will bring the money to your house, and our partnership shall commence forthwith. And the first thing which must be done, and must be done at once—to-night would be best—is to rid the shop once and for all of that surly fellow, whose face and voice are enough to drive all custom away. Get rid of him at once, Master Michael, and we will—'

But Michael's face had changed in a moment. He drew his hand quickly back, and said in firm accents,—

'Nay, Christopher, I have told you before; I cannot, nay, and I will not part from Steve Anderson.'

'Good Master Michael, you must needs hear reason,' answered Christopher, with sudden sharpness hardly becoming in a young man to an old; 'that fellow would be the ruin of any business in which he had a hand. I will not

Hosted by Google

have part nor lot in the matter till he be sent packing.'

'I cannot send Steve away,' repeated Michael with the same quiet firmness. 'I owe my life to his faithful service. So long as I live, he must have a place in my house.'

'And complete the ruin which he has begun, and which your easy ways have aided and forwarded,' cried Christopher, in great irritation. 'Master Michael, have you taken leave of your senses? What is this man to you or you to him that you should hand yourself over to ruin and beggary for his sake. Oh, you may talk and talk, and delude yourself as you will; but ruin and beggary and the debtor's prison it will be if you mend not your ways and begin afresh. You cannot do aught whilst that ill-conditioned fellow, with his insolent tongue and rude ways, holds sway below amongst your goods. No man will come to a shop where he gets naught but scurrilous abuse from the servant employed there. The man must go—it is useless wasting words upon him. Go he shall.'

'Pardon me, Christopher—go, he shall not,' answered Michael, rising from his seat and

Hosted by Google

standing upright. 'I may not long be master here, but so long as I remain, Steve likewise remains as my servant. That is my last word upon the matter. My decision is made. I shall not swerve from it.'

'Then our compact is at an end,' said Christopher, concealing his chagrin and disappointment beneath a mask of indifference. 'I would have helped you gladly if you, on your part, would have listened to reason; but I have not money to throw into the gutter at any man's behest. To lend to one who is vowed to a course that must end in speedy ruin, is to throw good gold into the sea. I am no such fool as that. Choose the money or the man—for you cannot have both.'

'I choose the man,' answered Michael, without the smallest hesitation, putting his arm about his daughter, who was clinging to him as she always did when it seemed to her as if things were going against him. She did not, this time, add her voice to that of Christopher. She had been thinking better things of Steve of late, and his prompt action in her defence a few days back, had made her doubly grateful to

Hosted by Google

him, though his bad temper was the ruin of the business as she well knew. Had Christopher's language been more gentle, she would have tried to soothe and reconcile the two men, and find some middle course upon which they might agree; but when her lover took so high a tone towards her dearly-loved father, she could not bear it, and all her loyalty went out towards him, and she felt as though he had all the right on his side and her lover none. Perhaps her attitude helped to irritate Christopher the more. At least, he did not try to soften his words on her account.

'I choose the man,' repeated Michael, after listening to another angry remonstrance from the young man. 'I owe him too much to sell him (as it were) for a paltry sum of gold Your help in this matter I must forego. It may be that God Himself will come to our aid, since vain is the help of man. Christopher, I ask nothing of you from this night forward. But ere you go forth, I give you one solemn word of warning:—Beware of that love of gold that is growing so strong a passion within you. You may not know it yourself; but the love of

Hosted by Google

money is enslaving you; and no meaner passion can root itself in the heart of man. It hardens his heart, it blinds his eyes, it corrupts his natural affections. If God in His mercy saves you from it, it may be by some fearful judgment and so as by fire.'

But Christopher was vexed beyond endurance at the failure of his attempt, and in no mood to listen to warnings. Without a word to father or daughter, he left the room, and went down the dark stairway.

Generally Magdalen accompanied him to speak a few tender words of farewell, but to-night she remained in the parlour, her arm about her father's neck; and Dick, who had lately returned from his visit to the scrivener, and had caught a few words of the heated discussion going on in the room above, unbarred the door to the guest and let him out into the street, a broad smile of delight spreading over his face so soon as Christopher's back was turned.

'Methinks you have not made much progress in my sweet mistress's affections to-night, Master Merchant,' quoth the boy to himself, as

Hosted by Google

he re-closed and barred the door. 'The stingy knave. Had I all the gold of the Indies, I would pour it in one glittering heap at her feet.'

Dick was in rather better spirits that night. He had heard from Tom that his sentence was not like to be a heavy one. No hanging, drawing and quartering at any rate; and, perhaps, nothing worse than a few days of prison fare. But what would his mother say when she heard of her boy in Bridewell?

Magdalen went up to her room with a heart as heavy as lead. She left her father below, wrapped in speechless gloom. Their last hope of saving poor Tom and his sister was gone, and the quarrel with Christopher was like to result in a real breach. It was all inexpressibly painful to the girl, whose faithful and loving heart seemed rent in twain, whilst the thought of the despair with which poor Tom would hear the news on Monday morning, was like the last drop of bitterness in her cup. The trouble was too deep for tears, and Magdalen was slowly climbing the stairs in utter dejection, when she was aware of a commotion which seemed to

Hosted by Google

arise in the upper rooms of the house, and this was accompanied by the sound of footsteps upon the balcony outside.

Hastily running up, she saw Marcia entering hurriedly by the window, a terror and horror in her eyes, her face as white as death, whilst from without she heard the sound of a furious voice calling to the girl that she need never dare to come back. She had chosen to take herself away, and where she had gone there might she stay. Her father's doors were closed to her for ever. She had better cast in her lot with her beggar friends and starve with them, since she could not obey her father.

Marcia sank down into a chair half fainting, and, for a moment, quite unable to speak. The sound of the commotion, and the angry voice of the money-lender drew Michael upstairs to discover what was going on. He found the two girls clinging together as if for mutual support; and when Marcia could command her voice so as to make herself understood, she unfolded a tale which stirred Michael's heart to its very depths.

All the story was now told without reserva-

Hosted by Google

tion. Marcia's generous wish to help her friends, her father's offer of payment for certain services which she was able and glad to render. How she had come gradually to understand that she was to use her beauty for a bait to get the prey faster into her father's clutches, and how at last she had been called upon to endure familiarities almost amounting to insult from Lord Hartsbourne, in order that he might the oftener come to her father's house, and sink more deeply into his debt.

Marcia's voice and strength came back as she recalled the incidents of the evening just passed, and her eyes flashed fire as she told how she had been insulted, and how her father had made light of it, and had refused to let her depart. The Viscount was half-drunk, and scarce knew what he said or did, and the girl at last broke away in horror and loathing, and fled to her mother's room for protection. Even there she found herself not safe, and again she had fled up higher, till the open window of her room and the balcony beyond suggested a safer asylum than any her own house could furnish.

'I had almost sprung over the rail, to be

Hosted by Google

dashed to pieces on the stones below,' cried the excited girl, with flashing eyes, 'but that the light in Magdalen's room caught my eye, and I fled here for protection. Oh, Master Michael, good Master Michael, have I done very wrong? My father is sorely angry with me. It may be he will vent his anger on you, and sure you have trouble enough without that.'

'Cease, my child, think not of that,' said Michael, laying his hand on the girl's head in a gesture of paternal blessing, that brought the hot tears to her eyes. 'Thou hast done right. Glad am I that thou camest hither. God grant that whilst I have yet a roof over my head it may ever be a shelter for the oppressed and the desolate. Think not of the future, the future is in His hands. The present alone is ours, and our duty is to act in accordance with His divine laws of mercy and brotherly love. Let the morrow bring what it will; for to-night, my child, you are safe. To-night you sleep beneath my roof; you share the bed of my own daughter. No hurt shall befall you here, and no man shall drag you forth from this safe sanctuary so long as we may call this dwelling our own.'

Hosted by Google

And stooping to press one kiss upon Marcia's brow, and one on the lips of his own daughter, the good old man withdrew and descended the stairs.

It was a hot, sultry night. The two girls, little disposed for sleep after the scenes through which they both had passed, lay wide awake in bed, talking together in low tones of what had occurred, and looking fearfully into the future.

Marcia could not deny that her father was furiously angry with her. It was but too probable that he would vent his anger upon his old friend and neighbour who had dared to receive and welcome the runaway ; and would immediately send in a demand for the arrears of rent, and when that was not paid on the spot, sell up the old man's stock-in-trade, and turn him into the streets with the same callous ruthlessness that poor Tom Davis was like to experience at the hands of his landlord on the morrow.

The recent quarrel with Christopher could not have come at a worse moment, for although he might be willing to give them some assistance in their extremity, Michael would be very loth to accept it. Marcia, who felt that she had

Hosted by Google

helped to bring this extremity upon her friend, vowed that she would work her fingers to the bone in their service; but the immediate question would be where to find a roof for their heads if they were turned penniless and beggared into the world. The whole outlook was so dreadful that Magdalen knew not how to contemplate it. Even Dick's misfortune added to their difficulties, for, had he been free, he might have bidden them come for awhile to the comfortable shelter of his parents' roof, where Magdalen knew a warm welcome would await them. But Dick was like to be in jail before Monday's sun had set, and how could they dream of presenting themselves at his parents' house with the news that he was lying in prison, the cause of his misfortune being his devotion to Magdalen herself. Marcia at last firmly closed the weary debate.

'Magdalen, your father's was the true wisdom —his were the most truly courageous words when he bid us leave the future in the hands of God, who has power to deliver those whom He will. Hark! the clock is tolling the hour of midnight! That is the signal that another week

Hosted by Google

has closed upon this weary world ; another Sabbath, God's day of rest, begun. Let us put away our doubts and fears and griefs, and strive to leave the future in His hands as your good father does. It boots not to talk and talk as we have been doing. It were better to commend our souls to Him, and try to sleep, feeling ourselves in His safe-keeping. Troubles enough may be in store, but let us not meet them ere they come. Sleep, if you can, Magdalen, and I will strive to sleep too. So we shall gain strength for what is before us.'

It was good counsel, and Magdalen strove to follow it. She closed her eyes, and they talked no more ; but it was long before her sad thoughts would let her sleep, and Marcia was troubled in the thought of her mother's grief, and wondered how the helpless sufferer would live without her daughter's care.

So they lay silent and sleepless, and listened in the darkness as the two bronze giants of St Dunstan's clock beat out the last hours of the old city of London.

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER XII

A MEMORABLE SUNDAY

SLEEP came to both girls at last; but Marcia's was broken and restless. She woke before the dawn with a sense of oppression, and thought the heat of the room hindered her from resting well.

'I will slip out and unclose the window,' she said; for they had not dared to leave it open when they retired, lest some evil-disposed person should follow Marcia's flight and enter the room by the balcony. And in a few minutes, Marcia had got the casement wide open and was drawing in large breaths of cool night air, as she looked up into the star-spangled sky.

A red glow in the east attracted her attention. At first she imagined that it was the first blush of dawn; but St Dunstan's clock, striking at the moment, told a different tale, and she gazed with greater interest eastward, stepping out upon the balcony to have a better view.

Hosted by Google

'Sure it is some fire,' she said. 'Heaven send that no precious lives be lost—no little children or helpless women burnt in their beds;' and she thought of the invalid in the adjoining house, and how terrible a thing a fire would be there.

'But it is a long way off, thank God,' she said as she stepped back again, shivering a little, despite the warmth of the night; 'though, methinks, I can smell something of fire in the air. The wind sets this way.'

Marcia left the window open, and got back into bed, with only that anxiety which we all feel when we see a fire and wonder who the sufferers may be. She fell asleep, to dream of burning houses; but when she woke, the sun was shining into the room, and she almost forgot the incident of the past night.

When the two girls descended to the breakfast parlour, they found the watchmaker listening gravely to a story that Dick was telling him. The boy, as was his habit, had risen early, to have a morning's saunter through the quiet streets, and had heard that there was a fire raging in the heart of the city. Of course,

Hosted by Google

he lost no time in running to the place, and found that it was no false rumour he had heard. With dilated eyes and hot cheeks, he was now describing the scenes he had witnessed—people throwing their goods out of the windows of the adjacent houses, for fear the fire should spread to them; the sick folk being carried out and taken into other houses which were supposed to be safe; and all the streets round fairly choked with carts and porters, all laden with the goods of those whose houses were burning, or who feared that their turn would come next.

The girls listened with the greatest interest to the story, as did also the watchmaker himself; and he shook his head, and said he feared that the long drought and dry easterly winds had made the houses very inflammable. He had seen many disastrous fires in his day, and went on to explain to Dick the folly of building houses so largely of wood, which, when dry, burned like tinder and offered no resistance to the flames. But no thought of personal peril was in the minds of any of the little party assembled round the board; and Magdalen's thoughts were more of the scanty fare which

Hosted by Google

she had to offer to her guest than of the fire of which the others were speaking.

Marcia, however, appeared to relish the porridge and brown bread as much as the hungry 'prentice boy himself; and her bright face and merry talk—for she was as good as her word, and had put all anxious thought away on that Sunday morning—seemed to do the heart of the watchmaker good, and he looked happier and less careworn than of late, despite the cloud of uncertainty and trouble which was hanging over him.

Dick would fain have escaped, after breakfast, to return to the scene of the fire, but was deterred by a glance from his young mistress and a few words from Michael, addressed to him and to all.

'It behoves us, on this day, above all others, to go to the Lord's house, and there to remember in our prayers those who are in peril and are suffering damage and loss. In praying for them, we must not forget to give thanks for our own safety. And thou, above all, boy, who may be debarred from attending public worship if things go against thee on the morrow, must

Hosted by Google

not fail to be in thy place to-day, to ask grace and guidance in the trial that may lie before thee.'

And so, when the bells rang out from many a church-steeple and tower—churches doomed to lie ere long in heaps of smouldering ashes, little as those who flocked to them that bright September morning dreamed of such disaster—the watchmaker, with the two girls and his apprentice, sallied forth to St Dunstan's Church; and the congregation assembled there was as quiet and attentive as usual, no apprehensions being entertained that the fire in the east would prove more disastrous than many that had gone before.

But when they emerged from the church, the wind had risen and there was the smell of fire in the air, whilst sometimes a cloud of smoke would drive fiercely along the street, and obscure for a moment the brightness of the sunshine. People began to look at one another and opine that the fire must be a very bad one, though at present in Fleet Street there was no apprehension of peril.

Steve Anderson always came to eat his Sun-

Hosted by Google

day dinner with his master's family, and to-day he was full of talk—a most unwonted thing with him. He had been down to the region of the fire, and told how the people near to the burning buildings were getting out their goods from the houses, and carrying them to the churches, which were supposed to be beyond the reach of danger, and storing them there for safety. The light wooden houses seemed to offer no resistance to the flames, but it was thought that the solid stone walls of the churches would prove a safeguard against the fire for a time at least, and everybody confidently expected that the conflagration would soon be extinguished. All other fires had been got under in due course; why not this?

'Know you how it began, and where?' asked the watchmaker.

'They say in Pudding Lane, at a baker's shop. But whether this be a true tale or no, I know not.'

'Pudding Lane!' exclaimed Magdalen with a start, 'and the wind driving the flames westward. O father, and Christopher's warehouse, now stored with his goods, is in Thames Street,

Hosted by Google

hard by Dowgate! It must be right in the track of the flames. O what will become of him if he loses all he has?'

A look of great distress clouded Magdalen's face, and both she and her father could not but remember the words of warning which he had spoken on the previous evening, and the phrase, 'so as by fire,' seemed to ring in the girl's ears as she sat gazing out of the window, her untasted dinner before her.

Dick and Steve, who had made better use of their time, and whose trenchers were now empty, started to their feet.

'We will go and see. We will help in the rescue of his goods, if there be peril to his warehouse!' cried they both in a breath. 'And I will run back quickly, Mistress Magdalen,' added Dick, 'if the fire is abated, and bring you tidings of him.'

No one tried to hinder them. Inaction on such a day was impossible. Even Michael was aroused from his customary state of dreamy abstraction, and he too got his coat and hat.

'You will not go to the fire, father?' said Magdalen anxiously, for the younger pair had already

Hosted by Google

started, and she did not think it safe for the old man to venture into a crowd alone.

'Nay, my child, I should be of no use there. But I would fain know more of what is passing. Methought I would attend the service at St Paul's this afternoon. Those who can go to church must do so, to pray for those who cannot. And the service over, I may chance to learn what is befalling, and whether or no the flames have been stayed.'

'We will go with you, father,' said Magdalen, and Michael raising no objection, the three were soon bending their way to the great Cathedral church, to attend the last service ever held within those walls.

It was no unusual thing for the watchmaker and his daughter to be present at the afternoon service at St Paul's. Old buildings, and especially churches, had a peculiar fascination for them both, and to Magdalen, as she entered and looked down the long Norman nave towards the beautiful choir, the place seemed especially tranquillising and quiet after the unwonted turmoil in the streets.

The congregation was somewhat scanty that

Hosted by Google

afternoon, many persons being attracted by the news of the fire to wander farther eastward in search of excitement; and when the service was over, and they presently emerged through the great west door into the pillared porch, through which the September sunshine was streaming, a concourse of people had collected, and with grave and anxious faces some were asking news of the fire, and others were describing its terrible spread.

St Magnus', St Margaret's, St Leonard's had been burnt to the ground in the hours of the early morning, and St Lawrence Pountney was now in flames, and said to be burning fast. Others coming up, declared that St Michael's, by Crooked Lane, had shared the same fate, and that St Clement's, in Eastcheap, was in the direct line of the fire as it spread northward, and was probably already destroyed.

Magdalen trembled as she stood, and Marcia's dark eyes flashed with excitement. Both girls stood gazing round them at the hoary and beautiful old buildings by which they were surrounded—the bishop's palace, the deanery, and the canons' houses clustering round the

Hosted by Google

church. The soaring spire of the cathedral had been destroyed by lightning some years before, but the square tower still remained, and the vast pile of old St Paul's presented a grand and imposing spectacle. Hearing of the wide-spread destruction of other churches, the two girls could not but picture to themselves a conflagration in these hallowed precincts; but little did they or those about them believe that in two days more those venerable buildings would lie in smouldering heaps of ruin.

Magdalen's main anxiety was for Christopher. By all she heard, the fire must be spreading fast along Thames Street, and his warehouse must lie in its direct path. All harsh thoughts of him died out of her heart in this time of anxiety and peril. She asked news of every passer-by who paused to speak to them, and her one anxious question was if the fire had yet reached Dowgate. Some said yes, and some said no; and the majority could not be certain one way or the other. But all agreed that there was no chance of arresting its progress before it should reach that spot. The Lord Mayor, just awakened from the fatuous apathy with which he had at

Hosted by Google

first heard the reports of the alarming spread of the fire, appeared to have no power to organise repressive measures, but rushed hither and thither, wringing his hands and wondering what he should do. The old crone on the steps of St Dunstan's, as the girls returned home at length, was crooning out what sounded like a triumphant chant; and a gaping crowd was gathered about her, drinking in her words, and regarding her as a veritable prophetess.

The sun was setting in the west, but in the east the light in the sky was increasing in intensity every moment as the sun's rays grew more dim. The smell of burning, and the obscurity, caused by driving clouds of smoke, caused a singular oppression in the atmosphere, and the two girls stood clinging together upon the balcony, whither they had gone to watch the glow in the sky, feeling as though some awful judgment had fallen upon the world, and wondering if the great and final Judgment Day, when it came, would be ushered in with some such great and terrible burning.

A sound of heavy trampling in the street

Hosted by Google

below caused them both to look down, and Magdalen gave a sudden cry.

'It is Christopher! It is Christopher! See —his coat is burnt—he has no hat. And there is Dick, too, singed from head to foot. But what is the burden they are carrying between them? Marcia, they have a wounded man, and they are bringing him here. Let me go! I must see what it all means!'

Without another word to each other, the two girls fled through the upper room within, and down the dark staircase. They reached the shop just in time to see what looked like the inanimate body of Steve laid upon the narrow counter, and to hear a few words from Christopher addressed to Michael, who had likewise come down to inquire into the commotion.

'I thought you would wish him brought here. I doubt if his own lodgings in Blackfriars will long be safe. He is a bold knave. I have misjudged him. If bravery and strength could have saved my goods, he would have rescued them single-handed. Take him in, Master Michael, and I will promise to care for him, and find him food. I have a pair of strong

Hosted by Google

arms left me yet, though all the rest has gone. He shall be no charge to you—save for the shelter of the roof which I trow you will not grudge him.'

Michael looked from the blackened face of the unconscious Steve to that of Christopher, which was very pale and resolute beneath its coat of grime, and asked, simply and quietly,—

'Have you lost all?'

'All,' was the equally simple reply. 'All but the limbs that God gave me. With that stock-in-trade I begin the world anew. But it is no time to speak of me and my affairs. Tell me whither I shall carry yon poor fellow. Thrice he rushed into my blazing warehouse, and thrice came back with some burden he hoped to save for me. But as he came forth the last time a falling tile struck him upon the head, and we had some ado to rescue him from the advancing flames. He is stunned and scorched, but living yet. May I not carry him to some bed where he can be looked to? My business has gone from me, and I can well play the part of nurse.'

Michael led the way, and Christopher followed bearing the form of the unconscious

Hosted by Google

Steve in his stalwart arms. The girls turned to Dick with eager interest. They must just hear a few more details ere they followed to attend upon the sick man.

Dick's grimy face and burnt clothing told a tale of their own, but he was as eager to tell his story as they to hear, and it was plain that the scene of terror in which he had been had not robbed him of his powers of speech.

'It is such a sight as sure no man will look upon twice. I would not have missed it for a thousand pounds!' he cried; 'the flames roaring like the sea in a mighty tempest, and towering up to the very sky in great pillars of flame. All along the water's edge there is nothing but a sea of fire, and great masses of flame float about in the air overhead, and sometimes fall slowly into the water, hissing and foaming like living things in their rage. And the people! I never saw such fear, such tumult, such madness, and such bravery. And the bravest of all was Master Christopher,' and the boy's eyes flashed at the thought of what he had witnessed, all fine words failing him, and all foolish jealousy and artificial sentiment burnt away

Hosted by Google

THE FIRE OF LONDON, FROM THE ENGRAVING BY HOLLAR.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

and dried up (as it were) in the real and true emotions of admiration and generosity called forth by the sights of that memorable day. 'I wish you could have seen him, mistress, as he stood by the blazing houses, close again the one which held his goods. He was more active than any in helping to rescue the stuff of the neighbours whose premises were already ablaze, before seeking to save his own. He was the only man who kept a cool head, and the fellows who could do naught of themselves could make shift to obey him. Wherever was most danger, there was he. But for all they could do —and Steve was ever the forwardest to help, he and Master Christopher side by side—the fire came driving on and on, and even the goods that were got out, if not borne swiftly away, would catch fire in the heat, being dry as tinder, and those who were carrying them would drop them, and flee away in a fright. We had saved some of Master Christopher's goods, but had not yet got them away from the blazing street, when a falling tile struck Steve upon the head, and we all thought him a dead man, for there came a rush of flame over him as he lay, and

Hosted by Google

we ran back, scarce saving ourselves from the burning. But as I ran I heard a shout, and, looking back, beheld Master Christopher struggling out of the flames, with Steve clasped in his arms; and then the people rushed at them both, and they seemed to be swallowed up, and borne onwards and away from the fire, and I followed, and we turned our backs on the flames, and came straight here, carrying Steve. Master Christopher did not even look back once at his blazing warehouse, but only kept bidding me carry him gently, for that he hoped the life was whole in him yet.'

This tale had not been told without various interruptions. Marcia's eyes were all alight with a generous enthusiasm, and she only wished she could have been there to see the gallant deed of daring. Magdalen's tears of pride and joy rose in her soft eyes, and she thought little of the heavy loss sustained by her lover, since it had brought out afresh the high courage and manliness of nature which once she had loved in him, but which of late seemed to have been obscured by the love of success, and the desire to be rich.

Hosted by Google

'Saved, yet so as by fire,' were the words that came into her heart as she went swiftly up the narrow staircase to see what might be done for Steve. She found, as she expected, that he had been laid in Michael's own bed, and as she gently sponged the grime from his face and hands, she heard words pass between her father and her lover that caused her heart to thrill with joy.

'Having lost all, I must sue to you for a present home and occupation,' Christopher was saying in a straightforward manly way, without the least touch of that superciliousness which had gradually been creeping into his tone of late. 'I must throw my energies into your business, my own being now represented by a handful of smoking ashes. Think you, Master Michael, that you and I betwixt us may do somewhat to revive the old prosperity of the house?'

'Ay, my son, I verily believe we may,' answered the old man with much feeling; 'and say not that you have lost all, for I trow, Christopher, that you have found this day that which will be more to you than houses

Hosted by Google

full of silver and gold. You were in greater danger of loss when your goods were safe and increasing. To-night, as I take it, you are a richer man than you were when you told us of your good fortune yestere'en.'

Magdalen gave one quick, shy glance into her lover's face, half expecting to see something of the faint mocking smile which had pained her often of late when her father had spoken in this strain; but there was no mockery in the keen, intelligent face now, rather a deeper earnestness of purpose that was usually seen there.

'In truth, Master Michael, I trow well you are right,' came the answer, calmly and thoughtfully spoken. 'I have learned a lesson to-day, or taken home to myself lessons taught, but scarce understood before. You have warned me once and again, but I heeded not the warning. Yet you are wiser than I. It is but a sorry exchange to gain the whole world and lose one's own soul.'

Magdalen's eyes filled with happy tears as she heard these words, and whilst her father pressed the young man's hand, she crept timidly

Hosted by Google

yet confidently to his side, and was clasped in such a warm and true embrace as had not been hers since the day that he had parted from them nigh upon three years ago.

Old London might be in flames, but Magdalen's heart was full of joy as she sought her bed that night.

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER XIII

FLAMING LONDON

MONDAY morning. Dick awakes with the first gleam of daylight; he has slept the sleep of youthful fatigue, despite the stirring scenes in which he has borne a part through the hours of the past day, and his first thought is of the fire, his next of the summons in the pocket of his doublet, to which he must answer in person that very day. He feels it hard that he cannot see the end of this great fire—if, indeed, it is still burning; and then comes the suddenly welcome thought—suppose Bridewell is burnt? Bridewell is close to Blackfriars, and yesterday Christopher would not take Steve to his lodgings there, because he said that if the fire kept driving fiercely along Thames Street, Blackfriars might not long be safe. Sure if the fire is raging still—and it was raging more fiercely than ever when sleep forced him from the

Hosted by Google

balcony to his bed overnight—they can send no prisoners to Bridewell.

Full of eager thoughts and questionings, Dick sprang up and hurried into his clothes. He knew there was work for him to do that day—a sick man in the house, little money to furnish forth the table, all the world in a commotion, the fire in the thoughts of all, and he to appear before the Lord Mayor.

He dashed across first to the baker's, as much in the hope of gathering news as of getting supplies, for they owed that worthy man a considerable sum. But he found himself warmly welcomed, supplied with everything he desired, and only asked in return to tell the tale of what he had seen in Thames Street the previous afternoon, and how the young merchant and the shopman had risked their lives for one another. Anybody who had had a share in such stirring scenes was a hero in the eyes of the little baker and his stout wife ; and when it became known that Steve was lying at Master Michael's in a critical state, the kind little woman bustled off, and returned with a basket containing a pat of butter and some new-laid

Hosted by Google

eggs, and also a pitcher of milk, and all these she desired the boy to give to his young mistress with her humble duty.

The fire still blazed furiously ; so much Dick learnt. How far its ravages had extended he could not gather for certain, but all agreed that such a fire had never been seen or heard of before, and folk were up and about long before their usual hour, all faces turned anxiously towards the east, where a great cloud seemed lowering, and the smell of fire and showers of sparks at intervals reminded the affrighted parishioners of St Dunstan's that their own goods might not be much longer safe.

Dick, in great excitement, ran home with his prize, and stealing up to the room where Steve lay, stopped short in the doorway, half-ashamed at the intrusion, yet fascinated by the little scene he saw. It was nothing very remarkable, only Magdalen standing beside her lover at the window, just leaning against his shoulder as they looked out into the street, his arm about her, and their heads very close together. But somehow their whole attitude and the gentle caressing tones of Christopher's voice told a tale that

Hosted by Google

sent the hot blood into Dick's face as he crept down the stairs again; and yet his heart did not sink into his shoes as on former occasions, nor did he experience any longings to fall upon his 'rival' and shake the life out of him. On the contrary, Dick was convinced that a braver and nobler man than Christopher did not exist. His old jealousy and hatred had vanished in one night, and his 'rival' had become his hero. He saw it all in a moment now—Christopher was the one man in the world who was worthy of his young mistress; and he himself would be their faithful slave and servant, growing up beneath their roof, and showing his devotion in a thousand ways that should win their love and gratitude. So pleased was he with this new idea that he did his own work and Steve's, to boot, before the watchers upstairs knew that he was up and about; and when Magdalen came down to see if there was any breakfast to be had, behold the table was spread and the hot rolls and a dish of eggs gave quite a festive aspect to the board.

Dick crimsoned at the thanks he got, but his heart was full of joy. He sighed as he thought

Hosted by Google

how soon he might be taken away from this happy home, but buoyed himself up with the hope that his sentence would not be a severe one, and that Magdalen would often think of him, and remember that he was bearing all for her sake.

The excitement caused by the fearful fire put out of the heads of the watchmaker and his daughter the danger hanging over Dick, and as there was no likelihood of business that day; and Christopher was on the premises to see to things if customers should come in, the boy soon slipped off without a word, feeling that it would now be well to know the worst.

He did not know where he ought to go to meet his doom. He had forgotten to ask the place where the Lord Mayor sat to judge offenders, and he could not read the paper himself; but he thought he would ask the first constable he met, and knew that if he turned his steps eastward, he should not be long in finding one.

Everyone seemed hurrying eastward like himself. The frightened excited people were eager to know for themselves exactly how far the

Hosted by Google

flames had spread. All who had friends farther east were trembling for their safety, and as the crowd hurried along, nothing was talked of but the fire—the fire—the fire. The dread word was on the tongues of all.

Dick was not long in seeing a constable, and hurried up to him, with his paper and his question. The constable was a big burly man with a rosy good-tempered face, and after looking at the summons and at the boy he burst into a gruff laugh, and gave it back into Dick's hand.

'Bless you, boy, the Lord Mayor has other fish to fry to-day than sitting on mischievous 'prentices. There's no sitting to-day; and will be none for some time to come, I take it. Whilst London is afire the corporation will have other things to do and think of. Look you here, boy, you just toss that paper into the fire, and I take it you will never hear another word of it. Why, they are trembling for Bridewell now. We don't want any more prisoners there to-day,' and with a nod and a wink the officer of the law dismissed Dick, who gave a yell of triumph and delight, and dashed off in the direction of the fire as fast as his legs would

Hosted by Google

carry him. No prison! No whipping! No bread and water for him! But glorious liberty to dash in and out in this seething crowd, and watch the fierce red flames doing their terrible work — liberty and freedom in these stirring never-to-be-forgotten scenes! Dick blessed that fearful fire in his heart as he watched the pillar of flame rise up in the smoke-darkened sky; and stopping by the smouldering ruin of a house, he thrust the summons into a heap of red ashes, and watched the paper shrivel up with huge satisfaction.

Meantime, Michael Widdrington with a heavy heart had left his own house to seek that of the poor scrivener, whose goods were that day to be sold. He had in his hand only two guineas, the last money in the house, and he had small hope of diverting the sale, either by promise or persuasion; but he could at least stand by his friend in the hour of his calamity, and help him with a little money to meet his wants until his own earnings should come in once more. Nicholas Brayling had scowled darkly at him as he left his own door that day, instead of giving him a neighbourly greeting, as had been his

Hosted by Google

custom all these years, and Michael's heart was heavy within him, for he knew that he had given dire offence to his proud neighbour by sheltering his daughter, and he was not the sort of man who easily forgot or forgave. Poor Tom's case might soon be his own, and now that Christopher was a ruined man, where could he look for any timely assistance?

Thus musing, he made his way to Smithfield, and to Tom's house. But there was no sign of a sale about the premises, and as he knocked at the door, Hannah opened to him with a smiling face.

'Ah, Master Michael, one must not rejoice when so many poor folk are homeless and houseless. It is a terrible judgment upon our sins here in this great city. But praise be to the Lord, He brings good out of evil to those who trust in Him, and verily we have been delivered as from the jaws of the lion.'

'Delivered! How delivered?' asked Michael in bewildered surprise, 'I thought your goods were to have been taken from you to-day?'

'And so they were, but for this terrible fire which has changed all. The bailiff was put in

Hosted by Google

on Saturday; but yesterday in the forenoon one came rushing to this house to tell him his own dwelling was in sore peril, and off he set without farther heed for his duties here. And anon came another messenger to tell us that our harsh landlord had been smothered in the fire. His own goods were in peril—he was rushing frantically hither and thither when he fell down choking in the smoke and reek, and before they could drag him out he was dead. And scarce had that tale been told ere another came to us—a gentleman who has often given employment to Tom; and he told us how that he has been charged by a client of his—he is a lawyer, you must know—to find some place of safety where he may put papers and valuables out of reach of the flames. He was willing to pay well for such a place, and everything was brought here that same hour, and the money paid down—a part of it at least—and all just for the standing room for the cases here in our back parlour. Other folk hearing of this likewise brought parchments and such like to Tom, for he is known for an honest man, though poor, and he is guarding them all now; and if any

Hosted by Google

man should come to us for the rent, we have it now safe, though our poor landlord being dead, I doubt if we shall be troubled for some time to come. Ah, Master Michael, it is wonderful to me to be saved thus at the eleventh hour. God knows I do not rejoice in the misfortune of others; but one may be grateful to Him for the release He has sent us from the trouble that was like to have broken our hearts.'

Michael set off to return to his own house in a mood of mingled thankfulness and awe. The relief of feeling his poor friends safe from the impending distress was very great; and yet how could he rejoice whilst the city was in flames, numbers of lives lost, and hundreds and thousands of his fellow-citizens left homeless by the vast calamity?

He could not resist the fascination of the fire, and turned his steps eastwards and southwards, making his way almost without thinking towards St Paul's, under whose vaulted roof he had passed so many sacred and tranquil hours. All Cheapside was in flames, and the nearer he approached the stronger grew the smell of fire, and more and more frequent were those rushes of

Hosted by Google

fiery sparks that swept over the houses like messengers of doom, and made timid women fear—not without reason—to see their own roofs ignite next. Wherever there was a thatched roof amongst the quaint and crowded houses, men were at work drenching the straw with water. Faces pale with apprehension, or blackened with smoke and grime, were everywhere to be seen. Around the old cathedral the church dignitaries were anxiously gathered. Already the roaring of the flames was drawing nearer, and the air was hot and dark. Surely the authorities would do something to stay the fire before that majestic pile was laid low! Those who gazed with loving eyes upon it felt as though Heaven itself must surely interpose, and that such a calamity as the burning of St Paul's could scarce befall the city.

On the steps of the church stood a wild-looking man declaiming and gesticulating to a crowd of persons collected round him. He was denouncing and describing in fervid language the desecration of the noble church in past days, telling the people of the abominations carried on there—how the church had been the mart

Hosted by Google

for traders, the lounging place of dissipated roisterers, a scene of gambling, sacrilege, and desecration; and how its bells had been gambled away by King Harry the Eighth—and declaring that God's judgment was now about to be poured out upon the place where man had so dishonoured His name.

Michael listened awhile with a grave and troubled face, and then bent his steps homeward once more, Everyone he met asked him news of the fire, and he could but shake his head and answer that it still raged unchecked. Hundreds of persons were hurrying off to boats and wherries, or to the old bridge, which, however, they could not approach for the fire, to strive to cross the water where they would be safe, and could watch the conflagration in security. Terror and dismay were visible in every face; and instead of confidently asserting that the fire must of necessity soon cease, timid folk were beginning to ask each other if it were not a judgment from heaven, and if the whole city might not be doomed, even as Sodom and Gomorrah of old?

Nicholas Brayling was still standing at his door as his neighbour came slowly back.

Hosted by Google

Michael had paused a moment as if to speak, for the scowl no longer clouded the money-lender's brow, and he asked somewhat anxiously,—

'Have you been down to the fire, Master Michael? Is it spreading yet, as men say?'

'I fear me so. It is terrible to hear the roar of the flames—like that of a mighty tempest at sea—and to see the clouds of smoke and showers of sparks drifting along the sky. But I went not very nigh. I went to see if St Paul's was safe. Men are quaking for it now. They talk of pulling down the neighbouring houses; but the flames rush on apace, and men seem paralysed with terror. God alone knows what is in store for us! We are in His hands!'

And so saying, Michael passed into the house to tell his news, and hear that Steve lay still in the same state. A surgeon had been called in, and had bled him, but he had not recovered his senses, and some injury to the brain was feared. All that could be done was to keep him perfectly quiet in a darkened room. Christopher was proving an excellent nurse, and Marcia a queen of cooks and contrivers. Her bright spirits did not desert her in this season

Hosted by Google

of trouble, and, but for her fears for her mother, she would actually have enjoyed the change to Magdalen's home.

The day wore away, and night came—such a night as could never be forgotten by those who watched through it. As the sun sank below the horizon, the fearful red glare in the sky deepened and strengthened, till the whole heavens were ablaze with a ruddy palpitating glow that rose and fell, and rose again in a fashion terrible to see, whilst in the darkness of the night the flames seemed momentarily to approach nearer and nearer, and there were times when danger appeared imminent even to the dwellers in Fleet Street, which had hitherto been thought absolutely safe.

There was no sleep in Michael's house for any but Dick, who had a boy's knack of sleeping through anything, and who was tired out with his day of excitement in and about the scene of the fire. The girls stood half the night upon the balcony, clinging together as they watched the fearful sight, and sometimes thought they felt the hot breath of fire on their cheeks. Michael sat beside the unconscious

Hosted by Google

man and read his Bible, and murmured broken words of prayer, whilst Christopher looked over the stock-in-trade, and planned how it could be most safely packed and removed, should the danger become more pressing.

Tuesday morning. Dick was up and about by dawn, and, dashing off eastward, returned quickly with the terrible news that St Paul's was said to be already alight, or, at least, it was so surrounded now by blazing houses, that to save it was impossible. Michael wrung his hands as he heard the news, and would have sallied out himself to ascertain the truth, but Magdalen clung to him, and begged him not to leave them. The peril was approaching fearfully near. Let them all keep together, and meet it together. It would be terrible not to know where he was, should any nearer peril threaten them.

Christopher advised that all should remain within to-day, all but Dick, whose feet seemed to be winged, and who kept rushing backwards and forwards with fresh items of intelligence every hour, each new report showing how terribly the fire was gaining: 'St Paul's is blaz-

Hosted by Google

ing, so that the flames almost seem to reach the sky'; 'Ludgate is alight now.' When would this terrible fire be stayed?

Nicholas Brayling, forgetting all else, came, with white face and trembling limbs, to take counsel with Michael.

'My goods! My goods!' he almost wailed, his bluff resolution and self-confidence all vanished now in the presence of a near and terrible peril. 'Good neighbour, I have jewels and money, and goods to the value of thousands of pounds stored away in my house. What shall I do? What shall I do? If I carry them thence into the streets, rogues and miscreants will set upon me and rob me of half I possess. I know well how they treat those who are lenders of money, and hated for the very thing that men desire them to be. If I leave them where they are, and the fire comes—all, all will perish. What shall I do? What can I do? Can you not see what a fearful pass it has come to with me? In either case, terrible loss. What would you do in like case, good Michael?'

'Christopher is packing our few goods, and

Hosted by Google

my small stock-in-trade, for convenience in moving, should we be driven forth by the fire,' answered Michael tranquilly. 'My chief concern is for poor Steve, who may not be moved without risk to his life. Wherefore, to the very last moment, we shall strive to remain where we are. Have you, too, thought of your poor crippled wife? Have you considered how best she may be moved if need for it arise. I counsel you to make that your great and chief concern. Our goods may well perish, if our dear ones are all saved from ill.'

Nicholas had never troubled his head about his sick wife, and even now he stared at Michael as though he thought him little better than an idiot. He went back to his own house muttering and moaning, and in every passer-by he seemed to see one of the thieves who would delight to filch his valuables from him, should he be forced to fling them out of the windows for safety.

And indeed the fear was not without foundation. From all the dens of Blackfriars and Whitefriars and the lowest alleys of the doomed city, the people had come pouring out,

Hosted by Google

THE BURNING OF LUDGATE.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

homeless and destitute, and among them were many who had long lived by crime and violence, and looked upon this overwhelming calamity only as an excellent chance for plunder. Was it to be wondered at if these miserable and degraded beings fell eagerly upon any spoil that they could succeed in filching from burning houses or from the streets into which terrified persons were continually throwing their goods, having neither time nor strength to carry them down in more methodical fashion. The authorities could neither cope with the magnitude of the conflagration, nor maintain law and order among thousands of men and women who thronged the streets and watched the advance of the flames with unwearied fascination.

Nicholas might well dread to see his goods brought forth into the open streets; and he went back groaning to his money bags and cases of valuables and parchments, wondering how much he could carry away on his own person, and whether, in that case, he would be safe from attack if he were seen to be encumbered by the weight of his treasure.

Of his sick wife lying alone and terrified up-

Hosted by Google

stairs, he had little thought. Marcia would probably hurry to her mother's aid if the worst came to the worst. He had other and weightier matters to thing of. Michael's advice was to him but folly, and there would have been no bounds to his contempt if he had known of one pressing anxiety in the old man's mind. If St Dunstan's perished, and the clock which had so long been his care, life would indeed be changed for him. He was standing at his door where Nicholas Brayling had left him. He went towards the old church in which he had been christened and married, and in which his wife's body lay; but it was to the clock that his eyes turned first.

Magdalen saw her father pass along the street, and guessed where he was going. She followed him with Marcia, and together the three paused in front of the well-known figures of the bronze men, and watched them lift their clubs and strike upon the bells. How many more times would they strike before the fierce red flames rushed up the walls of the old church, and the metal figures themselves melted away in the fervent heat. It was a thought that came with stabs of pain to all.

Hosted by Google

The old man took the key of the church door from his pocket. Silently they passed into the church and into the clock tower. Silently and lovingly they looked at those familiar wheels and bells, knowing that it might be a last visit, and there were tears in Magdalen's eyes as they stepped forth into the open air, and looked up once again at Gog and Magog. Was it childish of her to send up a prayer that they might be spared?

But how dark the air was getting!—and what was the meaning of that ceaseless booming roar? They had been longer than they knew lingering in the old church, and now they looked at each other in consternation.

'That is the sound of the fire,' said Marcia, in a low, awed voice, 'the sound they all talk about. It must be coming very near. Feel the heat! The air seems to scorch as one breathes it. And see! Look at that great arch of flame spreading over the sky and rushing on and on! Look at the showers of sparks! Look at the faces of the people! Oh, Magdalen, it is coming very near! God in his mercy save us all!'

It was a cry of awe and amaze, rather than

Hosted by Google

of terror. Now that the danger was actually at hand, they felt as though they had known that it must come. The girls clasped hands and looked at each other and at the angry sky. Christopher came hastily towards them as if relieved to see them safe.

'St Bride's is in flames,' he said, 'and Bridewell too.'

'St Dunstan's will be the next,' cried Magdalen; 'must we not quit our home?'

'No, not yet,' said Christopher; 'they are about to blow up houses around Whitefriars, and so check the flames, if it may be, and save the Temple. The King and the Duke of York are riding hither to see it done.'

'God grant they be in time to save St Dunstan's,' said Magdalen, 'and these homes of ours!'

'Let us to the balcony and watch!' cried Marcia, her spirits rising at the thought that something was to be done—that the time of helpless, hopeless waiting and inactivity had gone by. 'God bless his Majesty! and crown his efforts with success. Our blundering Lord Mayor and his council have done little for the city in this fearful time!'

Hosted by Google

The day was waning, but the red light grew stronger and stronger. The girls ran up the dark staircase and out upon the balcony, from which they could look eastward down the street, and watch the awful approach of that vast mass of flame which was towering to the very skies, and seemed so close to them that Magdalen hid her face and shivered. But Marcia threw her arm about her and her dark eyes dilated.

'The wind has dropped!' she cried; 'thank heaven for that. See how the flames have ceased to drive so furiously towards us, and rise straight up to the heavens. Hark, Magdalen! What sound is that? I hear the trampling of horses and the sound of many voices coming towards us from the Strand.' Both girls looked in that direction, but the projecting church of St Dunstan's shut out the view of Temple Bar. The next moment there was no doubting what that new tumult meant, for a loud cheer rose up, followed by a ringing shout, and the words were passed from mouth to mouth—'The King! The King!'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER XIV

ST DUNSTAN'S SAVED

DICK, on the balcony beside his young mistress (Magdalen has ordered and implored him to leave the streets), waves his cap frantically, and Marcia's white handkerchief is fluttering in the still air. All around there is frantic shouting and cheering.

'The King! The King! Heaven bless the King! God save the King!'

Such are the words shouted by men and sobbed by women as the roar of welcome runs eastward down Fleet Street, and in the dimness of the gathering dusk and the smoke-charged atmosphere, a gallant body of mounted men gallop through Temple Bar, and the city knows that something is to be attempted at last to stay the spread of the devastating fire.

The King heads the gallant little cavalcade, the Duke of York beside him, and even at

Hosted by Google

this moment of absorption and excitement His Majesty does not omit, as he raises his eyes to the balcony, and sees there the two fair girls standing side by side, and gazing down upon the scene below, to doff his plumed hat with kingly courtesy, whilst a smile lights up his bold dark face.

'We will save your home for you yet, fair ladies,' he cried as he galloped past; and his words and gesture were copied by one of the little train following behind, and both girls shrank back somewhat as they saw the smiling face of Lord Hartsbourne raised towards them with a look of insolent admiration in his eyes.

'We will save your homes for you, fair ladies,' he said; 'and then we may look for a reward from your lovely lips. You will not find it in your hearts to look coldly upon your preservers.'

No reply from either girl. Marcia looks down upon him with cold contempt. Magdalen shrinks back with a look of mingled fear and aversion in her eyes. Lord Hartsbourne, who had reined in his horse for a moment, gallops after the King's company, and a breathless hush of expectancy falls upon the street.

Hosted by Google

'What will they do?' asks Magdalen in a whisper.

'Marry, blow up some of the houses in the path of the flames, that, finding nothing to feed upon, they may die out, or turn elsewhere,' answered Marcia, trembling with excitement. 'Saw you not the cart with the powder barrels following the King? Lord Mayors may quake and tremble and weep like women, with their fat aldermen around them; but the King can act—the King can devise the remedy. The King can save his people. God save the King! Would I were a man that I might ride at his side! Would that I could stand beside him in thick of the danger. Oh, Magdalen, I was never made to be a woman. I long to be in the thick of it.'

Marcia's dark eyes are all aglow, she trembles with excitement, not with fear. Magdalen cannot but wonder if the explosion so nigh at hand may not shake to their foundations the ancient houses which have been so long their homes, and wonders if it is safe to stand where they are; but Marcia has no personal fears. Her thoughts are with the King and

Hosted by Google

his gallant little company. Where are they now? What are they doing? And how much nearer will the dreaded foe be permitted to approach them?

'Thy mother, Marcia?' questions Magdalen in trembling tones. 'Will she not be sore affrighted by all this tumult? Thy father is down there in the street. Canst thou not run and comfort her with a few cheering words? She must be in sore perplexity and distress?'

'Marry! a good thought!' cried Marcia, suiting the deed to the words, and stepping across the division in the balcony and in at an open window. 'I will be back anon. I may not linger lest my father should return and visit my defiance on her defenceless head. You are not afraid to be left alone? I trow there is no danger yet.'

'She will not be alone,' cries valiant Dick, standing before his mistress as if he had the power as well as the will to save her even from the advance of the mighty conflagration. 'I will remain at her side. I will protect her from all harm.'

Marcia laughs, and retreats into her father's

Hosted by Google

house. Magdalen turns to the boy with one of her sweet pensive smiles.

'You are a good boy, Dick. I am glad you are with us in these dreadful days. I have scarce had time to say how truly I rejoice that no harm has befallen you through your gallant defence of me a week back. It would have grieved me sore had you suffered punishment on my account.'

'It would not have grieved me, so it had been borne for you,' answered Dick, with a lapse into his sentimental vein; but even as Magdalen smiles her thanks his thoughts fly off into another channel, and pointing eastward, he exclaims,—

'Look, look! Saw ye ever the like before?'

In truth it is a grand and an awful sight. As Marcia said, the wind, which has been blowing with destructive energy for the past days, has now suddenly and entirely dropped, and the great sea of flame, instead of driving onwards, is now rising upwards against the evening sky in a huge column of fire that seems to reach to the very heavens, and presents to the gaze of the awed crowds assembled to watch its

Hosted by Google

progress, a spectacle never to be forgotten. The air is hot almost beyond bearing. The showers of sparks that drift by on the light currents of air seem like harbingers of coming destruction. Magdalen shivers as she stands, and wonders if aught can avail to save them from the doom which has laid in ashes half the royal city. Her soul goes up in voiceless prayer. For the moment the street is unwontedly still. Crowds of spectators have followed the King and his men. Just below stand Michael and Christopher, on the watch for tidings which may oblige them instantly to remove their carefully packed wares. A hush, like that which precedes the bursting of the tempest, has for a moment fallen upon all, broken only by the continuous and terrible roar of the fire to which ears have become strangely habituated these last hours.

Marcia has come back, and stands beside Magdalen again. Her face is illumined by the red glow of the fire, which is now making the street as light as broadest noon. Her voice is low and full of emotion—not of fear exactly, but of that thrilling awe and mysterious ex-

Hosted by Google

altation of spirit that often falls upon us in hours of imminent peril.

'Tis like the pillar of fire and cloud when the Lord looked through it in the morning watch and troubled the Egyptians,' she says in low tones. 'Look, Magdalen, look! Was there such a sight before? Methinks the heavens themselves are in a blaze! Sure it is a judgment upon us for our sins.'

And now comes the sound of returning shouts and cries. The people are streaming back faster than they went. All are talking, gesticulating, questioning—all are in a ferment of excitement. Fragments of eager exclamations reach the girls as they stand in their high balcony, afraid to mingle with the hurrying crowd below, yet unwilling to lose the least knowledge of what is passing without.

'We shall hear it anon! the match is lighted!'—'What a roar and a shaking it will make!'—'The King was there! The King himself stood by to see the train laid. It was he who ordered off the people, and saw the light applied.'

And then, as the sound of galloping horse-hoofs was heard, and the people scattered right

Hosted by Google

and left to let the gallant little cavalcade ride through and wheel round, the shouts again rent the air.

'God save the King! God bless the King!' And the dark-faced monarch again uncovers, and smiles and nods in friendly fashion to his subjects clustering round him in that strange and awful glare.

Reckless, profligate libertine though he be, he looks every inch a king as he sits on his dark, snorting charger, and takes command of that evening's work. And the people forget all else but that he comes in the hour of their dire extremity, and works in person for their safety, and the shouts and cheers that go up proceed from hearts full of loyalty; and Charles, looking round upon the sea of faces all turned upon himself, may feel, and doubtless does, something of the true bond of union between a sovereign and his servants.

He has reined up just beneath the balcony upon which the girls are standing. He is speaking kindly to those about him; and old Michael has advanced to within a few feet of His Majesty. His eyes seem to fall upon the tall figure of the

Hosted by Google

picturesque old man, whose silvery locks are lighted up by the red glare of the fire. Magdalen is sure that the King is speaking to her father, and that he is telling of his anxiety for St Dunstan's, for all eyes are turned for a moment in the direction of the church, and at that moment the bronze men strike their measured strokes upon the bells—a peaceful, tranquillising sound in that moment of excitement and dread. And then the King speaks, and his voice reaches the girls' ears as they lean over the balcony to listen.

'Save St Dunstan's! Ay, verily, we will strive to do that, good Master Clockwinder. And, verily, I am glad to have found a man who, in these times of pressing peril, thinks less of his own goods than those of the commonwealth. You are behind your times, my good man, but I like you all the better for that.'

'I humbly thank your Highness for that kindly word; but mine own goods are stored for moving, and they be but few and poor, so that the loss were not to me what it might be to others upon whom kind fortune has smiled.'

'We will save St Dunstan's and your own

Hosted by Google

goods too, if it please kind fortune,' answered the King; 'and we will fain hope that the fickle jade will look more kindly upon you in the future. You are a right honest man, and merit better fortune at her hands. Perchance your day will come even yet.'

Michael, who loves not praise or overmuch notice, modestly retires in the crowd, making a deep reverence to the King as he does so. With a kindly smile upon his face, the monarch turns and speaks a few words to somebody beside him, and then the little interlude is at an end, and almost forgotten in the excitement of anticipation.

But though many minutes have passed by, there is no sound of the expected explosion, and people are on the tiptoe of strained excitement.

'The match must have gone out!' exclaim those who have watched the laying of the train. 'Sure, but for that, it had long since fired.'

The word is caught up and passed from mouth to mouth.

'What will they do next?' asks Magdalen, trembling in every limb with excitement. 'Wait till the flames come and fire the barrels?'

Hosted by Google

'Scarce that, methinks,' answered Marcia. 'One of the men will be told off by the King to reconnoitre with care. How now? Saints protect us! what is he going to do? Look! look! it is Lord Hartsbourne! See! he seizes a torch from a bystander and rushes off towards the train! He lacks not courage, the bold villain. But my father—what can he be doing? Magdalen, what does it mean?'

'Your father is begging and praying him not to adventure himself so recklessly into peril,' answers Magdalen, breathlessly watching the little drama going on below, which they can well see from their vantage-ground. 'I am certain it is that. See how he hangs upon him and drags him back, and how the other fiercely, yet laughing all the while, shakes him off. Methinks I can almost hear the words of angry chiding with which he bids him begone.'

'My Lord Hartsbourne has no lack of oaths at command,' says Marcia, a dark look coming into her eyes as she leans over the balcony to watch.

It is just as the girls have seen and divined. The young Viscount has seized a lighted torch,

Hosted by Google

and, vowing to set fire afresh to the train, is dashing down the empty street into the region of peril; whilst the usurer, unable to detain him, yet terrified for those post-obits which lie securely packed in iron boxes, just within his doors, ready for instant removal, stands looking after him and wringing his hands, knowing that if any fatal results attend the reckless young nobleman's bold venture, those precious documents are not worth the parchment on which they have been written.

Suddenly there is a dull roar—the ground shakes beneath the feet of the expectant and breathless crowd—the house rocks and trembles—and the girls in the balcony cling, shuddering, together, in wonderment and fear.

A shout goes up from a hundred throats,—

'Back, back! Mercy on him, he is a dead man!' And those who can still see the figure of the young man bearing the torch shout yet louder, for the ground beneath his feet seems to rise up in clouds of dust and smoke. The air is darkened with falling ruins. The Viscount flings up his hands as in a vain effort to save his head, and then falls prone along the

Hosted by Google

earth, buried in the wreck of the falling houses.

The explosion has saved Fleet Street—saved St Dunstan's—saved the old twin timbered houses where Magdalen and Marcia dwell; but it has cost the life of the reckless young Viscount, who is presently rescued from the ruins, and brought into the usurer's house.

'Is he dead? Say he is not dead!' cries the miserable man, bending over the disfigured and inanimate form; and as the surgeon, who has been hastily summoned from the crowd pressing round the shop, shakes his head, and points to a wound on the head which has cloven the skull, a dreadful change comes over Nicholas' own face. It turns from ghastly grey to purple; his eyes glare wildly round. He clutches at the handkerchief about his neck, there is a gurgling sound in his throat, and the tall figure sways helplessly for a few seconds, and then falls senseless over the body of the Viscount, which has been laid upon the counter of the shop.

'An apoplectic seizure. Dear, dear! what a day of disaster!' said the surgeon, as he strove to recover the helpless Nicholas from the fit. 'It

Hosted by Google

is the result of his excitement. He is of full-blooded habit. He should have listened to my warnings, often delivered, and have permitted me to bleed him at stated intervals, as others do who value their health and well-being. Good neighbours, where is Mistress Marcia, his daughter. She must be called, and must say where her father is to be taken. He will not soon recover of this fit. I doubt me if he will ever be the same man again. But he must be got speedily to bed and bled there, else I will not answer for his life.'

It was a strange ending to a strange day. Marcia, hastily summoned to her father, was accompanied by Michael, Christopher, and Magdalen, and the sick man was carried up to the chamber overhead where his wife lay, and laid in another bed there, for the poor woman would not hear of his being put out of her sight. All her old love seemed to come back in a flood as she saw him lying before her, feeble and helpless, and after the terrors of those dreadful days, it would have been cruelty to thwart her.

'Lame Hannah is the best of nurses,' whis-

Hosted by Google

pered Marcia to Magdalen. 'If she would come to nurse them both, I would pay her well for her trouble. I shall have my hands full with striving that the business be not lost. If Dick could make shift to run and let her know how sorely she is needed, methinks she would come. I would sooner have her, for all her weakness and lameness, than any other body I know. It is but to sit beside them and watch them, and I would pay her well.'

'I trow she would come with pay or without,' answered Magdalen, eagerly. 'Dick will be full glad to go, to see if the fire be stayed at Smithfield, as they say it is stayed here. Oh, Marcia, I know not how to give thanks aright! St Dunstan's saved—our home saved, and so many hundreds of others gone!'

Marcia made no answer, for her father had stirred upon his pillows, and there was a look in his face which told her that he had come to himself. Whilst Magdalen went to fulfil her behest, she leaned over him and caught a few feebly spoken words.

'You must keep the business together. Ask young Christopher to help. He has lost his

Hosted by Google

own goods. Let him take charge of mine. He has a shrewd head. He will not let things go to ruin. Mind what I have said, Marcia—thou art mistress of all—and let Christopher help thee.'

Then he became speechless again, and passed into a state of semi-consciousness. The surgeon who had superintended the removal of Lord Hartsbourne's body to his father's house and had received a liberal fee for his trouble, came and stood beside his patient again, and shook his head complacently. He, at least, was not displeased by this night's work.

'He will never be the same man again—never the same again,' he said in an unmoved professional tone. 'He has long suffered from a plethora of blood, now it has gone to the brain. This right side as you see is helpless—dead. He will never have the use of it again. He may live on for some little time—a few years even—but he will be as helpless as his wife there. He will never do any business again.'

Michael, coming in, heard these last words, and gently bid Marcia leave him to keep watch for the night in that sick chamber.

Hosted by Google

'I shall not sleep to-night, my dear,' he said gently, 'and I cannot do better than pass the remaining hours beside my old friend. You are wearied out, and Magdalen will sleep the better for having you at her side. They say that the fire is checked, that it will approach us no nigher, that we may lie down to sleep in peace. Leave your sick parents to me. I will see that they want nothing. And go you to seek that rest which, at your age, nature so sorely craves after such a day.'

Marcia was fain to obey this kindly behest; for her weary limbs were ready to give way beneath her. Magdalen had a simple supper ready for her friend next door, and Dick and Christopher were still out, and not likely to be back soon. But the girls were ready enough to seek their couch, and though the glow in the sky was yet fierce and red, it was less vivid than they had seen it but a little while back. The heat and the smoke were likewise abating, and as the two stepped out together for a last look from the balcony ere they retired to rest, they could see that the sullen flames were only rising up from the ruins of the houses already

Hosted by Google

destroyed, and on this side of the city, at least, had ceased to spread.

'Heaven be praised for a marvellous deliverance!' cried Marcia with clasped hands and moist eyes. 'It has been a fearful time; but, methinks, the peril is well nigh over.'

'Hark!' cried Magdalen, with a little tremulous laugh. 'There be the bells of St Dunstan's clock! Oh to think how near we were to never hearing them again.'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER XV

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

'Master! Master! There be so many customers in the shop, I know not what to do. Pray you, come and help me!'

Michael started up from the bedside of Steve, who was beginning to awaken to a vague consciousness of passing things, wondering what Dick could mean.

The great fire was out at last. It had blazed more or less for five days, breaking out afresh when it had been thought conquered, and keeping the whole city in a ferment of anxiety and agitation. But now it was really subdued. There had been no fresh outbreak for above twenty-four hours. People were beginning to breathe freely again, and to think of their neglected occupations. The city authorities and the citizens whose homes had been wrecked had their hands and their minds full with

Hosted by Google

schemes for the rebuilding of London, but there was still a great part of the town left standing, and trade, suspended for the moment through the dire calamity, now began to revive and even to increase, as if to make amends for that dreadful week's holiday.

It had not occurred to Michael that any good would come to him from the fire. He fancied trade would be stagnant for long, that none would have money to spend in buying clocks, that things would go from bad to worse with him, though, for the time, the illness of Nicholas, and his consequent reconciliation with his daughter and his neighbour, had saved him from losing his home.

But Dick's urgent call roused the old man from his lethargy, and he hastily descended from his post to find the little shop filled with customers, most of whom were handling the goods Dick had brought out, and asking more questions than the boy could answer.

'Good Master Michael, I want a clock made quickly for my new shop,' said an energetic citizen. 'It has suffered woefully in the fire, and the clock is wrecked, but the building is

Hosted by Google

quickly to be restored, and I must have a clock as before. Tell me how soon I may hope to have one, and let it be of your best workmanship.'

'Master Widdrington,' said a countryman, 'I will buy this clock here. Tell me the price and I will pay and take it with me. There be scarce a clockmaker's in all the city that is not destroyed. You will sell your wares faster than you can make them, I take it, now.'

'I wish the best watch you have by you, Master Michael,' said an alderman. 'I bought a rare beauty but ten days gone by at Master Fisher's in the Poultry. Luckily, I did not pay for it, for he wished to see that it kept good time, and so I left it with him. The fire swept away all he had, and my watch with it. Give me the best you have; I shall not quarrel at the price. All men speak of you as an honest dealer.'

And so on, with one and all. Michael stood aghast, and quickly dispatched a message next door for Christopher to come to his assistance to book orders and try to satisfy customers.

Lucky was it for Michael that he had Christo-

Hosted by Google

pher with him now, for the young man, during the days of peril, when it seemed likely that all the store of goods would have to be removed at a moment's notice, had carefully examined the whole stock-in-trade, and knew exactly of what it consisted. Also, he had discovered amongst the packing cases and rubbish in the cellar a certain number of old clocks and watches in a more or less damaged condition that had been bought up by the watchmaker at different times with a view to future repair, and which had been forgotten by him afterwards and allowed to remain where Christopher found them. These now were mended with all speed, and helped the old man greatly in the execution of the orders which kept pouring in upon him. The notice the King had bestowed upon him had been talked of and repeated from one to another until the old clock-winder of St Dunstan's had attained no small reputation. It quite astonished him to see the customers coming in, and he had no time to frighten them away with his long-worded arguments on the faultiness of his wares. With a city to rebuild, people were mostly in a hurry. They had other business on hand as well as the

Hosted by Google

buying of their time-keepers. So soon as Michael had undertaken to supply them with what they wanted within a certain time, they generally made off in hot haste. Some would stay to chat with the old man, but nobody cared to talk of anything but the great fire and the havoc it had made. The burning of the crypt of St Paul's and the library of valuable books and manuscripts stored there, four days after the fire had been extinguished in the city, was a fresh calamity; and though Michael's clever fingers were at work morning, noon and night over his wheels and delicate bits of mechanism, his mind was quite as much occupied with the troubles of his fellow-citizens as with his own work, and, in striving to do what he could to console some of the sufferers in the fire, he ceased to lament the inferiority of watches. He had so much work on hand that he gladly and willingly engaged mechanics who had been thrown out of work through the fire, and every spare corner of his house was soon filled by industrious men, all toiling together to supply the demands of impatient customers. Very soon Michael had as much as he could do in superintending the work of others; for he made it a

Hosted by Google

rule that no piece of work, however trivial, should leave his premises that had not been submitted to his jealous examination, and no work but the best of its kind ever passed the censorship of those deep-sunk eyes.

'Why, master, I scarce know the place,' said Steve, when he came down to the shop in a few days' time, gaunt and weak, but with all his senses about him. 'I'll never forget what you did for me. I'll serve you my very best so long as I can; but if the evil temper gets the better of me again I'll go.'

'No, no, Steve. You will not drive customers away as easily as in old days,' and a smile lighted the old man's eyes as he spoke. 'Our wares are growing to be the fashion now, and there are so few shops left standing that folk seem driven to come here, whether they will or no.'

But nobody had to complain of Steve's temper now. He was silent, it is true, but careful of his master's interests. Dick skipped about his day's duties with the blithest air imaginable, and who so proud and happy as he when Magdalen one day slipped an old silver watch into the

Hosted by Google

pocket of his doublet, saying, with a little quivering laugh,—

'My father and I want you to keep that always, Dick, as a remembrance of the fire, and of the days just before. It is not worth much money, but you will not like it the less for that.'

Dick knew not how to speak his thanks, but he kissed his young mistress's hand, and vowed with fervent gratitude that nothing should ever part him and his treasure.

As for the poor scrivener, Tom Davis, his house having escaped the fire, he found himself poor no longer, and bustled in and out with a bright face and important air. Hannah was still acting as nurse to the sick man and his wife next door, and he was glad to have her there, for his own little house was crammed from basement to attic with the strong boxes, papers and ledgers of the business men of his acquaintance, saved from the fire and given into his care for the moment, till their bewildered owners could see their way before them. He had his hands full of work now, for it seemed as though everybody in the city desired to send word to their relatives and friends in different parts of the country of

Hosted by Google

their welfare and safety, or to furnish them with a description of the fire. So Tom's pen was going from morning till night, and money flowed steadily in, enabling him to pay off his debts, settle with his landlord's successor, and even to make a bargain for the purchase of his old house, later on, when the money promised him for the safe housing of other persons' goods should all have been paid him.

As for Christopher, he was toiling from morning to night. Nicholas Brayling, though hopelessly paralysed and helpless, had still partial possession of his faculties, and was resolved that his business should be carried on for the future by the enterprising young merchant, who was known by this time to have a head on his shoulders. The money-lending part of his business he thought it best to drop. He could not entrust that to any other person, and the untimely death of young Lord Hartsbourne had given him a disgust of such dealings.

'There is plenty to be gained by honest trading, and I will content myself with that in the future,' he said; 'and, look you here, Christopher, bring me that casket beside my bed-

Hosted by Google

head, and send my daughter to me. I have something to say to her.'

Marcia approached her father with a smile. She no longer feared him, for illness had somewhat softened the man, and it seemed to his wife as though he was once more the husband of her youth, who had kind words and smiles for her, and never cowed her by his bluster or contemptuous taunts. It was her greatest pleasure now to lie and look at him and talk of old days. Marcia flitted in and out like a sunbeam, happier than she had been for long. And, in answer to her father's summons, she came in and stood beside him, asking him what she could do for him.

'I want you to take this casket, child. All that is in it is your own. Some of it was fairly earned, and is your rightful due. Some is the gift of a father who repents the unkindness of the past, and would like to make some sort of atonement.'

'Nay, father, talk not so. Is it not enough that you are spared to us and that we are all so happy?'

'Ay, ay, my wench; ay, ay. But it is my

Hosted by Google

fancy you should have the casket. I have always kept it by me night and day these many years, in case I should suddenly want it in a hurry. I am not like to want it now, and it is my whim to give it you to do what you will with it. Take it, and kiss thy father, and begone.'

And then the shrewd old man went on to speak of what was most on his mind.

'When Tom Davis next comes to see Hannah, tell him I want to see him. I would have a deed of partnership drawn betwixt me and young Christopher. I am a helpless log, and like to be for the rest of my natural life. I must act and work through another, and his interests and mine must be one. I will make him a partner, and give him a share of the profits. I doubt not that Brayling & Mason will soon be such a thriving firm that men will come from all parts of the country to buy our wares.'

Marcia carried away her treasure, and ran upstairs to her room to examine it. But first she called Magdalen to enjoy the surprise with her, and eagerly the two heads were bent over the casket as Marcia turned the key.

'Golden guineas!' exclaimed the girl, as she

Hosted by Google

lifted the lid. 'I thought as much! O Magdalen! Saw you ever such wealth before? Look, there must be a hundred of them or more. And they are mine—all mine! I know not what to do with such wealth. But yes, I do know. I know in part. Some of this is thine too, sweet Magdalen.'

'Oh no, no!' cried the girl, drawing back quickly.

'Nay, but it is!' insisted Marcia eagerly. 'You know I served for it. You must not rob me of the sweets of my earnings. You know why I served, and for what. Magdalen, see here; you must pleasure me by taking one of these rolls—nay, I shall think you refuse my friendship if you will not, and you shall give it to the worthy scrivener towards the payment of the debt. He is prosperous for the moment, but such good times may not last, and it would lighten your kind father's heart to think the debt was lessened by so much. Magdalen, think what I owe your father, and you will not refuse me this pleasure. You cannot find it in your heart to say me nay.'

So Magdalen relented, kissed and thanked

Hosted by Google

Marcia, and took the money to her father, who, after hearing all, received it with a gentle smile, and showed his daughter a like sum carefully put away, all that the present prosperity had enabled him to save against the day when he should have power to refund the whole amount due to his old friend's son.

'I shall wait awhile yet. Tom is prosperous now,' he said; 'but there will come slack times for him, I doubt not, and by then I trust to have the whole sum laid by. My daughter, what rejoices most my heart in this, is that Christopher is at one with me now in this matter. I have no secrets from him since he is the moving spring of the business, but when I told him of my wish to keep a portion of our newly-gotten gold for the payment of the debt, he said it should be so, and smiled as in the days of old. My child, I am ready to give thee to Christopher in marriage, whenever he shall ask for thee. I am afraid no longer to trust him with my heart's treasure. He has been tried in the fire, and I have no fears now for him or for thee. He will make thee a kind husband, as thou wilt make him a loving and dutiful wife.'

Hosted by Google

Magdalen's blushing face was buried in her father's breast; but there was a joy in her heart and a smile on her lips. She whispered to him of the good fortune in store for Christopher, of which Marcia had told her, and the watchmaker rejoiced to hear it, though it put an end to his own dream of having Christopher as his right-hand and successor in his own business, which had revived so marvellously of late.

'Father,' said Magdalen, 'let Dick be your right-hand and successor. He is young yet, but a good lad, and staunch and true; and you can train him in your methods, and make a skilled watchmaker of him, which Christopher could never be, for it is a trade that must be learned young, I have heard you say so a thousand times. Dick is apt, and clever, and you can train him to carry out, some day, your your own ingenious ideas and improvements. I should like to feel that you will have Dick always with you. He is as good a boy as ever breathed.'

'A capital plan!' said Christopher, a day or two later, when something of this was said to him as he sat in council with father and daugh-

Hosted by Google

ter, and the blushing and delighted Dick had been dismissed with some vague intimation of his future prospects. 'You know, good Master Michael, that though I may be a help to you in organising anew this business, which bad times have caused to fall away to almost nothing, I myself could never be a watchmaker, and a man who knows not the trick of the trade he professes can scarce look for success in the long run. I should be at the mercy of my own journeymen were I to strive to carry on the business myself, and none knows better than you what likelihood there would be of success to one placed in such a strait.'

Michael shook his head slowly.

'It would never do—never do, and it would be hard to learn the niceties of the delicate mechanism, unless trained from youth.'

'Impossible, I should say,' answered Christopher. 'I could sell watches, but I could never make them, and that would scarce be long a profitable business. No, no. Dick is young. Dick has a natural aptitude for the trade he has chosen, and burns to show the metal of which he is made. He is a good lad,

Hosted by Google

and you will train him to be a worthy successor to you. As for me, my place is already found. I shall have my hands full from the moment the deed is signed, and it shall not be my fault if Master Brayling's matters do not thrive in my hands. It may be some while before I win back the prosperity I lost in the fire; but I trow it will not be long ere I can make a home for Magdalen, if you, sir, will trust her to my keeping.'

'Ay; that will I gladly do,' answered Michael; 'but I see not why you need seek the shelter of another roof. There be the upper rooms of this house, which none use save Magdalen herself. Why not plenish them and begin your married life there? I doubt not that Nicholas would like well to have you so near at hand, and I should love to have my child still beneath my roof.'

'Oh, father; how I should love it, too! I cannot bear the thought of leaving you!'

'If you will have it so, good Master Michael, I will raise no obstacle,' said Christopher genially. 'I am mindful that I owe to you what I can never repay.'

Hosted by Google

Magdalen gave him a grateful look. The old man smiled sweetly, and slightly shook his head. He never seemed to know why those about him were grateful to him, and he answered gently,—

'Nay, nay; the gratitude will be mine for leaving my child with me, and for the help I doubt not you will still give me from time to time in the matter of the business. And, Christopher, I had some thoughts of bidding poor Steve take up his lodging here. There is ample room in the basement for him to sleep; but, if you mislike him—'

'Nay, nay; I mislike him no longer. He is a bold, true-hearted fellow, and risked his life to save my goods, albeit he had little to thank me for. I should be a base churl were I to forget that; and it will be well to have so staunch a protector on the place, now that the stock increases in value, and my business may often take me away for days, and even weeks together. I have heard no surly words from him of late. I trow he will make an excellent good servant yet.'

'He has always served me well, in heart

Hosted by Google

if not in fact,' answered Michael. 'Steve would lay down his life for me or mine, as he has more than once proved. Christopher, dost thou not think he, too, should share somewhat in our prosperity? It has been on my mind of late that naught has been done for him.'

'Give him an interest in the sale of the goods,' suggested Christopher, with a smile on his face. 'That will help him to curb his tongue if that member should again become unruly. I do not think you will be a loser, Master Michael.

Michael smiled at this, that pleasant kindly smile which of late had been so little seen. Already, he looked younger than he had done for several years past. The lines of perplexity and trouble were smoothing themselves from his brow. His eyes no longer looked out wistfully and pathetically from hollow caverns, as if asking dumbly wherefore so much sorrow had come to him. He walked more erect. There was colour in his cheeks, and some of the old dreamy abstraction had been replaced by a manner more suited to one who had his own work in the world. As for Magdalen,

Hosted by Google

the wild-rose pink had stolen back to her face, and it had regained its softened roundness of outline. There was a sweet happy light in her eyes as she went about her daily tasks, and her voice was again heard singing as she moved to and fro, whilst her step was free and light and strong.

Christopher's and Michael's plans were all carried out. Dick looked almost double his normal size when he heard the promotion in store for him, whilst Steve's dark face took an expression between delight and shamefacedness as he was made to understand the difference in his own position, and in the shop there were no more sounds of angry words and surly rebuffs. Magdalen smiled to herself sometimes at the change, and once she gently said,—

'It is not so very hard to speak kindly and civilly now, is it, good Steve? I am right glad to be spared the sound of ill words and bickerings.'

'And I take shame to myself, mistress, that I was so long a slave to the demon within me,' said Steve, a dark flush rising in his cheek; 'and my punishment is that all men will say

Hosted by Google

that I could curb him for my own interest, not for my master's welfare. But—'

'But you had striven against him long before,' said Magdalen, gently, 'or he could not have been so easily vanquished now. I have seen. I understand.'

'Heaven bless you, mistress, for those kindly words!' said Steve, drawing his sleeve across his eyes. 'All men may gibe as they will at me, and I care not, so that you and my master understand.'

'Do you remember,' said Marcia to Magdalen, as they stood in the balcony together at sunset; 'do you remember the night when the fire began, and how we lay awake, hour after hour, listening to the clock?'

'Do I remember,' exclaimed Magdalen; 'can either of us forget it as long as we live? There seemed nothing but misery before us, and no way of escape.'

'And when I rose before dawn,' said Marcia, 'and opened the casement, and saw the red glow in the sky, I little thought that the fire was to open the way of escape, and that in

Hosted by Google

three days all would be changed. People call it a judgment. I know not altogether what they mean; but such it was in truth to many of whom we thought sadly and bitterly on that dreadful night. Some have been laid low, and others raised up, and crooked things made straight, and rough places plain. I feel almost as if we had passed through the valley of the shadow of death, and had wakened up to a new life in a new world.'

Hosted by Google

CHAPTER XVI

GOG AND MAGOG AT A WEDDING

'SUPPOSE it comes not in time! What a grievous thing it would be! But there!—my good mother never played me false yet. Sure she will not do so on this day of all days, my sweet young mistress's marriage day!'

So said Dick, as he stood out in the middle of the street beneath St Dunstan's clock, in the grey dawn of a bright day in 'St Martin's summer,' after the great fire of London. He was gazing westward as well as he could through Temple Bar, and each cart or waggon, as it lumbered through the gateway, became at once the object of his keen scrutiny. When there was nothing in sight, his eyes went up to the bronze men and their clubs, and a smile as of triumph shone over his face as they smote upon their bells with unfailing regularity.

'They do it as well for me as for my master!' quoth Dick, with pride in his eyes, by

Hosted by Google

which he meant, that he had, on the previous Saturday, been permitted by Michael, under the most watchful scrutiny, to wind up the great clock himself; and, ever since that day, Dick had felt at least three inches taller, and was rather of opinion that the whole city was in some sort dependent upon him for its knowledge of the exact time.

With hundreds of churches lying in ruins, St Dunstan's clock had gained in importance, and it was known to be kept so accurately that it was certain to be true to the minute. Passers-by would pull out their watches from their fobs to consult it, and Dick felt a throb of pride each time he saw this, already looking upon himself as the future guardian and keeper of the clock.

'I would that my mother could see those iron men, and know that 'twas I wound them up! How proud they would be at home when Master Tom's letter reached them!'

How proud his parents were, Master Dick was soon to learn. The letter announcing the good fortune in store for him, and the happy change in his master's fortunes, told them also of the speedy marriage of Mistress Mag-

Hosted by Google

dalen and Master Christopher, and Dick made urgent request for another of his mother's wonderful hampers to help to furnish forth the marriage board. Dick knew his master's frugal, modest ways, which did not greatly change even in days of prosperity ; and he well guessed that his young mistress would scarce trouble herself with great preparations for the bridal feast. And glad enough was the boy that they should be thus indifferent, for it gave him his opportunity ; and, all that week, he had been picturing his mother up to her elbows in flour and pastry ; and his mouth watered as he thought of the festal preparations in his mother's kitchen at home. But the hamper had not arrived over-night, as he had expected, and after dreaming of it all night long, the boy had risen with the first grey dawn of day to look out for some traveller's cart to bring it to the door that morning in time for the feast.

'Dick! Dick! Sure that is our own Dick. But grown such a man, I scarce knew him!'

Dick's eyes were just then fixed upon the clock, and he had not noticed the approach of a light cart, till the sound of a familiar voice

Hosted by Google

smote upon his ears, and with a start and a great cry of 'Mother! mother!' he flung himself into the arms of a buxom country-woman, who had hastily descended from her perch amongst a number of baskets and panniers.

What a kissing and chattering and commotion there was! The burly farmer sat in the cart, grinning from ear to ear in delight at his son's fine words and manly ways. As for the mother, she knew not how to take her eyes off him; and it was with difficulty that Dick could get her to watch the actions of Gog and Magog, who were about to ring out the four quarters for the hour of seven.

'Look! look! You must look, mother!' cried Dick, in an agony lest she should miss the moving spectacle. 'They will move, I tell you! They will move! And it was I who wound them up! Do look and listen!'

'Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong!' The effect was all that Dick could have wished. The simple country folk stood amazed at the sight of those falling clubs; and when Dick proceeded to enlighten them with a rather tangled explanation of the mechanism which caused them to move, they felt that they

Hosted by Google

had indeed reared one of the world's prodigies, and that their Dick would live yet to make his mark there.

'And my master's house is close by,' said Dick, turning away at last; 'just there where the great fire stopped. And I will tell you how the King came riding down to blow up the houses to stop it, and how he vowed he would save Master Widdrington's house for the sake of the young mistress, and St Dunstan's for its wonderful clock. Oh, mother! I have such things to tell; I marvel how we shall get the time to say it all. It is good to have you here to see Mistress Magdalen wed. And have you brought the cakes and pies I asked you for?'

'Pies! Cakes!' cried the burly farmer; 'why, bless you, boy, there be enough to feast a parish stowed away in this cart. I would you had seen the bakings and the makings and the stewings and the picklings that have been going on from morning to night since that letter of yours arrived. Old Dobbin will not be sorry to be quit of his load, I ween. Is this the house? Lend a hand with the baskets, then. I marvel if you will find a place to stow them all away.'

Hosted by Google

Oh, what an unpacking and what a spreading of tables there was on that busy happy wedding morn. Well was it that Marcia took the lead, and had the parlour set forth for the feast with a goodly array of silver tankards and fine china, such as made the worthy farmer folk open their eyes in astonishment. Michael Widdrington gave courteous and genial welcome to these unexpected guests from the country, and his praises of Dick and prognostications for his future so won upon the parents' hearts, that they wished their gift had been doubled. And, whilst good Mrs Bolt was putting the finishing touches to the table, assisted by the happy and important Dick, Marcia—upstairs, in the room into which she had rushed on the night of the great fire—was arraying Magdalen in a simple robe of white—a robe of sheeny texture, the gift of the silk-mercer himself; though Magdalen declared it far too fine for her, and would scarce have worn it but to please those about her. It was a bright, though sweetly pensive face she wore upon her wedding morn, for all was sunshine round her path. She was to marry the man to whom her faithful heart had long been given,

Hosted by Google

yet without being called upon to leave the shelter of her dearly-loved father's roof. She would gain a husband's love without losing the protecting care of a parent; and her dearest friend would still be her closest neighbour; ready, as before, to comfort and help in moments of perplexity. The cloud of want and debt had rolled quite away, and fair fortune was smiling down on them as never before in Magdalen's remembrance.

'Open the window, Marcia,' said the bride, as she stood in her soft, white robes, ready to go down. 'Let me hear the iron men ring their bells. I wonder, do they know it is my wedding day! It seems to me the bells ring out joyously to-day. I am glad I am to be wed in St Dunstan's Church, and glad it was spared in yon fearful fire. The fire was a friend to us, Marcia; all our good-hap seems to date from that day. And glad I am that the King made shift to stay its ravages before it reached St Dunstan's Clock!'

COLSTON AND COMPANY, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.

Hosted by Google

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

Price 5s., Cloth.

FRESH FROM THE FENS,

A STORY OF THREE LINCOLNSHIRE LASSES,

By E. WARD.

With Eight Illustrations.

PRESS OPINIONS.

'"Fresh from the Fens" is another story of no common merit.'—*Yorkshire Post.*

'The distinct but delicate characterisation of three little girls. They are realised for us with a force that is really admirable.'—*Spectator.*

'A pretty tale, simply and effectively told.'—*Daily News.*

'"Fresh from the Fens" is a charming tale for young people.'—*Record.*

Price 5s., Cloth.

A PAIR OF ORIGINALS,

A STORY

By E. WARD.

With Eight Illustrations.

PRESS OPINIONS.

'A fresh and pretty story.'—*Daily Telegraph.*

'Is sure to be popular.'—*Record.*

'This is a charming book, charmingly illustrated.'—*Bristol Times and Mirror.*

SEELEY & CO., LIMITED, ESSEX ST., STRAND.

Hosted by Google

TALES BY M. E. WINCHESTER.

ADRIFT IN A GREAT CITY. A Story. With Illustrations. Price 5s., cloth.

PEARL OF THE SEA. *Third Thousand.* Price 5s., cloth.

'A charming conception.'—*Saturday Review.*

A CRIPPLED ROBIN. *Third Thousand.* Price 5s., cloth.

'A pretty story, and there is fun as well as feeling in many of the chapters.'—*Times.*

A CITY VIOLET. *Fifth Edition.* Price 5s., cloth.

'Miss Winchester, whose power of delineating character is giving her an honourable place among the writers of serious fiction, has never done anything better than this.'—*Spectator.*

A NEST OF SPARROWS. *Eighth Edition.* Price 5s., cloth.

'Miss Winchester not only writes with skill, but writes from the heart, and with full knowledge of her subject. Her story is most genuine, pathetic, without being sad.'—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

UNDER THE SHIELD. A Tale. *Sixth Edition.* Price 5s., cloth.

'We wish all religious stories were written in the same simple and natural way. We can conceive no more healthy reading for children.'—*Academy.*

'We welcome with real pleasure another book by the author of "A Nest of Sparrows." "Under the Shield" is to be noted for its purity of tone and high aspirations. . . . . There is true fun in the book, too.'—*Athenæum.*

THE CABIN ON THE BEACH. A Tale. *Fourth Thousand.* Price 5s., cloth.

'This tender story cannot fail to charm and delight the young.'—*Guardian.*

THE WAYSIDE SNOWDROP. A Tale. *Fourth Edition.* Price 3s. 6d., cloth.

'A bright flower indeed. With all her tenderness and grace, Miss Winchester narrates one of those pathetic stories of a poor London waif that at once arouse the loving sympathy of children.'—*Guardian.*

CHIRPS FOR THE CHICKS. With Thirty-one Illustrations. Price 2s. 6d., cloth.

'The book is worthy to be a nursery favourite.'—*Guardian.*

'The merriest, most amusing, and infinitely the most rhythmical book of poetry for the young people produced this season. . . . . Others besides children may read the "Chirps" with pleasure and amusement. The illustrations are very happy.'—*Standard.*

SEELEY & CO., LIMITED, ESSEX ST., STRAND.

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google

Hosted by Google